

Abstract

The article examines Pietro di Donato's 1939 novel *Christ in Concrete* and how translation marked its production, circulation and reception in the United States and Italy. It highlights how the politics of class and of migration informed the book's translation and interpretation in different places and times, so that it was alternatively perceived as the ultimate working-class novel, a startling testimony to the lives of migrants in early twentieth-century America, or a compelling portrait of the history of Italian migration. It also asks whether di Donato's 'minor masterpiece' constitutes an Italian, American or Italian American classic, an example of world literature, or all of the above.

Of migrants and working men: how Pietro di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* travelled between the US and Italy through translation

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Pietro di Donato's 1939 novel *Christ in Concrete*¹ has been described as a 'minor classic' unjustly 'relegated to the margins of mainstream American culture' (Gardaphé 1993: ix). Yet the history of its production, its complex circulation and its multiple receptions tells a much more elaborate story, one which has implications for the construction of national, hyphenated and transnational literatures, as well as for our understanding of the connection between these models and the history of mobility, both social and geographic – that is to say, with the history of class and with that of migration.

The key agent in forging and shaping these multiple connections is translation, both in the form of the self-translating processes which informed di Donato's work and of the way in which his novel subsequently travelled between languages, cultures and critical establishments. In following the vicissitudes of one book, from its first publication till today, I will therefore be carrying out an exercise in the history of reception, but I will also be questioning issues of method and classification, as well as the imbrications between critical frameworks and broader political constructions of literary heritage. I intend to examine, in particular, how the politics of class and those of migration have informed the translation and the interpretation of the novel (two closely related processes) in different places and at different times, starting from 1940s America and then moving to the post-war period and the development of Italian American Studies on one side of the Atlantic,² but also to Fascist as well as to contemporary Italy on the other, before finally taking a transnational perspective on di Donato's work. The intention is to show how, as a result of these multiple readings, *Christ in Concrete* has been perceived – over time and in different places – as the ultimate working class novel, as a startling testimony to the harsh lives led by migrants in early twentieth-century America, as a compelling portrait of the specific history of Italian migration to the US and an ethnic narrative of Italian greatness in distress, or even as an icon of regional Italian identity. These interpretations, which inform translation processes both in the form of micro- and macro-textual strategies and are often particularly visible in the accompanying paratext, are themselves subject to translation and re-translation. As they travel across the Atlantic, they link di Donato's work to distinct and at times conflicting models of both identity and literature, which are in turn based on notions of national, international or transnational culture. To ask how *Christ in Concrete* and its translations fit these models therefore also raises questions as to whether and in what sense this 'minor masterpiece' can be defined as an Italian, American or Italian American classic, as an example of world literature, or as all of the above.

Ultimately, I want to ask whether focusing on the multiple processes of translation and self-translation, fashioning and self-fashioning which inflect the history of *Christ in Concrete* can lead us to a broader conception of writing linked to migration, one which does not oppose but rather re-composes its double belonging (within a country of origin and a host culture) as well as its multiple contextualizations (cultural, geographic, linguistic and political). If framed in a transnational perspective, this broader circulation of the writing of migration can both illuminate and be illuminated by such notions as minor literature on the one hand, and world literature on the other.

The making of a minor classic

Christ in Concrete was di Donato's first and by far most successful novel. The book had a complex genesis. Its first chapter initially appeared as a short story in *Esquire* in March 1937. The popular success of the story – which was included, among other things, in an anthology of that year's best new writing (O'Brien 1938) – led di Donato to expand it into a full-length work. Published in 1939, the novel was an immediate success, even beating Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, which was published in the same year, as a main selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club (Gardaphé 1993: x).

The author was a second generation Italian American, born in New Jersey in 1911, the eldest son of migrants from the Abruzzi area of Italy. *Christ in Concrete* is largely autobiographical in content, narrating the story of a family of Italian migrants from the same region and centring on the figure of Paul, a young boy whose father, Geremio, dies in a building accident and who is subsequently forced to work as a bricklayer in order to support his mother and siblings. If this fate is very similar to that of the young Pietro di Donato and of his family (his father also worked in the building trade and died in an accident), the language in which the story is told is far from realistic. As noted by a number of critics, the power of the novel (and, markedly, of the initial short story, devoted to the death of Geremio) lies in the impact of its language, which mixes mimetic and expressionist traits, producing an idiosyncratic idiom which Gardaphé has described as 'neither Italian nor English, but an amalgam of the two' (1993: xii).

Pietro di Donato constructs the language of his tale and that of his characters by mixing registers and styles, so that Biblical tones, modernist experimentalism and the everyday language of New York builders sit side by side. He also inscribes his pages with processes of self-translation, often rendering literally into English the rhythms and the expressions of the migrants' plural, strongly regional and dialectal 'Italians', as well as those of their imperfect yet highly expressive and creative 'Englishes'. This complex language has intrigued but at times also alienated critics, who have often treated it rather reductively, as a token of the 'ethnic flavour' of the novel, as in the case of the back cover of the 1993 edition, which describes the book as follows:

Vibrant with the rich ethnicity of the city neighborhood, sonorous with a prose that recalls the speaker's Italian origins, and impassioned in its outrage at

prejudice and exploitation, Pietro di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* is a powerful social document and a rare, deeply moving human story about the American immigrant experience.

In recent years, however, greater attention has been paid to the function played by di Donato's linguistic and stylistic choices. The best assessment so far comes probably from another Italian American writer, Helen Barolini, for whom:

At his best, as in *Christ in Concrete*, di Donato's narrative patterns form, in their diversity, one of the richest linguistic textures to be found in the twentieth-century novel and make the bridge, for him and for his characters, between a lost and mythical Italy and a real but never realized America.

(2000: 183)

It is this anti-realist quality which takes the language of *Christ in Concrete* beyond a purely mimetic level, giving it a unique character which has nothing to do with the imperfect cadences of inexperienced language learners and pidgin speakers. An extract from the initial pages of the novel, which introduce Geremio and his team of builders, can serve to prove the point:

Six floors below, the contractor called. 'Hey, Geremio! Is your gang of Dagos dead?'

Geremio cautioned the men. 'On your toes, boys. If he writes out slips, someone won't have big eels on the Easter table.'

The Lean cursed that the padrone could take the job and all the Saints for that matter and shove it...!

Curly-headed Lazarene, the roguish, pigeon-toed scaffoldman, spat a cloud of tobacco juice and hummed to his own music ... 'Yes, certainly yes to your face, master padrone ... and behind, This to you and all your kind!'

The day, like all days came to an end. Calloused and bruised bodies sighed, and numb legs shuffled toward shabby railroad flats...

'Ah, bella casa mio. Where my little freshets of blood and my good woman await me. Home where my broken back will not ache so. Home where midst the monkey chatter of my piccolinos I will float off to blessed slumber with my feet on the chair and the head on the wife's soft full breast.'

These great child-hearted ones leave one another without words or ceremony, and as they ride and walk home, a great pride swells the breast...

'Blessings to Thee, O Jesus. I have fought winds and cold. Hand to hand I have locked dumb stones in place and the great building rises. I have earned a bit of bread for me and mine.'

The mad day's brutal conflict is forgiven, and strained limbs prostrate themselves so that swollen veins can send the yearning blood coursing and pulsating deliciously as though the body mounted leaping streams.

The job alone remained behind ... and yet, they also, having left the bigger part of their lives with it. The cold ghastly beast, the Job, stood stark, the eerie March wind wrapping it in sharp shadows of falling dusk.

(5-6)

What di Donato is using here is an elaborate composition technique which incorporates multiple strategies of translation and self-translation: from language to language, but also across registers and social as well as regional variants of both English and Italian, and accompanied by calques of foreign syntax, examples of borrowing and paraphrasing, the foregrounding of culture-bound items and of untranslated expressions, and so on. So among religious echoes and poetic turns of phrase (particularly evident in the last three paragraphs), we encounter Italian words like 'padrone' (master) simply dropped in the middle of an English sentence, while others, like 'piccolinos' (little ones) are modified in accordance with English syntax. Translation strategies are at times incorporated into the writing, as in 'master padrone', where the English and the Italian word are given in quick sequence. Elsewhere, however, the reader is left to interpret the text on its own: 'bella casa mio' remains opaque unless one knows at least some Italian, or makes the connection between the expression and the following sentence, which refers to the place where the worker visualizes his family waiting for him, i.e. the home. 'The Lean' is a likely translation of one of the typical nicknames which often replaced both individual and family names in rural Italian culture and which travelled with working class migrants across countries and languages. And the reference to 'big eels on the Easter table' evokes regional culinary traditions which would not be familiar to most American (and possibly also to many Italian) readers.

This type of writing makes di Donato a firm candidate for the label of translingual or, preferably, heterolingual author (Kellman 2000; Grutman 2006): his writing is intrinsically polylingual and could not exist without the multiple languages which underpin it. Whether translation is eagerly displayed or openly refused within it (Gentzler 2006, 2008), polylingual writing always bears its mark. Translation processes are always already inscribed in this kind of literature, from the moment of its inception, rather than happening *a posteriori* as a second (and possibly secondary) process. Therefore translation is also a constitutive element of a work's production, rather than purely a component of its circulation. It is an integral part of its birth and of its life, not an additional (and optional) afterlife (Benjamin 1999).

The presence of translation within the 'original' also produces particularly complex scenarios if and when a polylingual work eventually gets translated in a more conventional sense – that is, transported into another culture and language. In the case of a work which is associated with a personal or collective history of migration, as is often the case with polylingual writing, this process is further complicated by the sense of a double belonging, which can inscribe the writing within the cultural, literary and linguistic context in which it was produced, but also in the one to which it is linked and of which it bears traces: the culture and language of its more or less remote, at times even mythical, origins. That same double inscription, however, can become an instrument of exclusion or marginalization, labelling the work (and its author) as neither fully belonging to one context, literary system, canon, nor to the other. It is these mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, appropriation and marginalization that I want to explore next, looking at the reception of *Christ in Concrete* in the US and Italy.

The double life of *Christ in Concrete* in the US

In the US, from the start, the novel had a double reception: on the one hand it was read as a 'working-class bible' and as essentially a political or social novel; and on the other it was seen as a direct testimony of the experience of migration, or, more specifically, as a form of autobiographical testimony offered by di Donato, his act of bearing witness to the life of the Italian immigrant community in the US or, even more specifically, in New York, in the first half of the twentieth century. While the two interpretations may to an extent combine, the tendency has been for one to prevail over the other, as already demonstrated by the quotation from the back cover of the 1993 edition of the novel cited above. A number of scholars – including Fred Gardaphé (2004), Robert Viscusi (2006) and others – have documented this double reading within di Donato's American reception, so I will offer just a few salient examples here.

In an article entitled 'The bricklayer as bricoleur' (1991), Arthur D. Casciato has discussed the appropriation of Pietro di Donato's figure and of his work by the League of American Writers, showing how the association (directly linked to the US Communist Party, of which di Donato was a rather unorthodox member) tried to present the author of *Christ in Concrete* as the embodiment of the worker-as-artist. According to Casciato, "the [image of the] bricklayer-writer" created by the League becomes 'a hyphenated construction based on class that inscribes even as it erases ... the more typical ethnic designation, "Italian-American"'. That hyphen is 'an ideologically charged one meant to hold, in this case, the working-class ethnic writer "at hyphen's length", so to speak, from the established community' (75).

Louise Napolitano has also examined the explicit 'politicization' of di Donato's work, listing critics who spoke for and against it from the 1940s to the 1980s (she is clearly against it, by the way). Already in 1939, E. B. Garside described the author as a 'shining figure to add to the proletarian gallery of artists'. Two years later, Halford Luccock spoke of *Christ in Concrete* as a proletarian novel written 'by a workman

resembling more nearly the much heralded actual “proletarian” author than any other’. More recently, Napolitano cites L. J. Oliver who, writing in 1987, follows the same line and ‘interprets the novel’s subtext as Marxist’. At the other end of the spectrum, she points to Louis Adamic, whose 1939 review ‘contrasts the novel with other “novels by the laboring class” praising Di Donato for not shaping, adjusting and twisting the truth “to conform to the intellectuals’ notion of synthetic Marxians”’, and pointing out that in the book “ “[t]here is nothing twisted to fit an intellectual hypothesis. There is no ideology, no simplification of life... There is no sentimentality or subservience. There is always a sense of the dignity of man and the worker”’ (Napolitano 1995: 70).

Even outside an explicitly political reading linking di Donato to the Communist Party and to Marxist theories (or equally explicitly denying those links), the image of ‘worker’s bible’ stuck to *Christ in Concrete*, eventually resurfacing, either on its own or side by side with the increasingly visible and eventually dominant label attached to the book as one of the founding texts of Italian American literature. Today, critics talk of ‘a work of social protest, proletarian manifesto, genius work of primitivism, modern Greek tragedy, and the prototypical Italian-American novel’ (Burke n.d.); ‘something rare, a proletarian novel written by a proletarian’ or ‘an instructive display of worker exploitation that in the words of writer Helen Barolini, “fit the social protest sympathies of the period”’ (LaGumina). The novel has also been described as ‘a metaphor for the immigrant experience in America’ (Severo 1992), while Studs Terkel, in his preface to the 1993 edition, writes of ‘the story of so many immigrant peoples whose dreams and realities were in conflict. It is the story of fathers and sons and the hard-bought legacy’ (vii).

As the status of Italian American studies (as a cognate subject area to African American or Hispanic American studies) grew within US academic circles, di Donato’s figure and, in particular, his first novel, were the object of a process of ethnic,³ rather than political, affiliation, eventually taking their place among the founding fathers and founding texts, respectively, of the new discipline (Barolini 2000; Gardaphé 2004; Tamburri 1998). For Anthony Tamburri, for instance, writers like Pietro di Donato and John Fante played a key role in creating ‘a corpus of writing heavily informed by their Italian heritage’, with works that ‘celebrate their ethnicity and cultural origin’ (16) – and those works have a rightful place at the heart of the newly established Italian American library. Fante and di Donato were part of that ‘second generation’ of Italian immigrants which emerged in the 1930s and 1940s, making the explicit choice to use English, but also to write, in many cases, for a broad American public – which makes their appropriation as Italian Americans all the more important for the field, if a little bit fraught (Tamburri 1998: 124-25). This direct association with the emerging category of Italian American literature has undoubtedly brought new visibility and recognition to di Donato, and the most recent editions of *Christ in Concrete* are a result of that process. At the same time the label, replacing or at least gaining prominence over that of ‘proletarian novel’, has encouraged a new kind of niche positioning, associating the book with an ethnic context and potentially restricting its appeal.

A gradual shift seems to have taken place in the US, then, from the prevalence of a class-related reading of *Christ in Concrete* to that of an ethnic, hyphenated interpretation. This shift also corresponds to a parallel move which sees di Donato's novel transported from the margins of a national canon of twentieth-century American literature to the centre of a smaller corpus of Italian American writing. National readings (i.e. readings which place the novel in the broader context of American literature, rather than emphasizing its ethnic colouring) were, as we have seen, more frequent in earlier critical appraisals but are nevertheless still current.⁴ They tend to connect di Donato's novel to other fictional renditions of the Great Depression and to a tradition of proletarian novels which emerged around that time. They also stress class-based interpretations of the book and often underline, for instance, the multiethnic nature of the migrant world of the tenement described by di Donato, as well as the ties of class solidarity sustaining the community of its inhabitants. Ethnic (i.e. Italian American) readings of *Christ in Concrete*, on the other hand, usually centre on ideas of Italian national character and heritage, on the drama of Italian migrant workers' lives in the US, and on their role in the (literal as well as cultural) construction of America. It is unsurprising, therefore, that in the US context those interpretations which stress the Italian (and therefore Italian American) credential of di Donato should also emphasise the realistic, mimetic and 'Italianate' traits of his language, often choosing to ignore or even to explicitly deny its more experimental qualities (Mulas 2000).

'Back' to Italy

The enduring opposition (and occasional superimposition) of ethnic and national appropriations which has characterized both the initial and the continuing US reception of *Christ in Concrete* also had its permutations in Italy. The critical assessment of the novel and the way in which its translation has been presented to Italian audiences have changed over the years, offering different modulations of national-, regional- or class-focused interpretations of di Donato's work. The 'italianità' of the author, of his characters and of his work as a whole dominated Italian reading in the early years, and is to an extent still present today. Political interpretations of *Christ in Concrete* (especially of its connections with communist ideas) had to be played down initially, but emerged more forcefully in the post-war period. Today, regional appropriations of both author and book are also frequent, as are interpretations which directly link di Donato to a specifically Italian critical appreciation of Italian American literature and of its development.

The years in which di Donato wrote and published his masterpiece were dominated, in Italy, by Fascism and by its attempts to control the cultural life of the country. These were also, however, the years of the 'discovery' of contemporary American literature and, in spite of the imposition of increasingly stringent censorship measures, Cesare Pavese could call the 1930s 'the decade of translations'.⁵ Volumes translated from the English included some names and works now associated with the Italian American second generation, starting with John Fante and, precisely, with di

Donato's *Christ in Concrete*. Critical reception of these works was mixed and tended to construct Italian American writing as firmly 'other' from Italian literature even as it underlined the spirit of 'Italianness' it placed at the heart of individual works. This first phase of the reception of Italian American writing in Italy effectively established boundaries and critical criteria, and its limitations remained in place more or less unchanged (just as the translations produced at that point kept being reprinted almost without alterations) until at least the 1980s.

From the 1990s onwards, a new generation of critics with a specific interest in Italian American literature started to emerge in Italy⁶ and a new wave of translations and retranslations also began to appear. In the intervening decades, of course, Italian American Studies had grown significantly in the US, both in size and in methodological rigour, but also in strategic influence and visibility. So the 'italoamericanisti' who appeared in Italy in this phase could rely on a solid base of historical, philological and theoretical research. Yet they had to fight against the received wisdom of the Italian critical establishment, which relegated Italian American writing to a sociological phenomenon – rather than a literary one – with the exception of isolated 'great voices' or 'masterpieces'. The latter were more likely to be perceived purely as an integral part of the American tradition by specialists in Italian literature, while at the same time finding themselves on the margins of the American canon and therefore of the interests of Italy's 'americanisti'. This created a continuing double erasure which occluded the specificities of Italian American writing as a field in its own right – and it was this double barrier that any revaluations had to battle against. At the same time, notions of local and ethnic identity which had been almost excluded from Italy's mainstream political discourse between the 1950s and the 1980s (a period dominated by a political model based on ideological and class battles) gradually resurfaced. It is not purely by chance that the renewed interest in Italian American writing emerged in Italy with a new generation of scholars who had seen the collapse of that ideological model and of the corresponding political project, as well as the reappearance of localist messages, and the resurfacing of racism and ethnic tensions which marked the transformation of Italy into a country of immigration. These new or renewed instances have at least partly opened up previously unavailable spaces for the reception of Italian American writing in Italy and for a rethinking of its role in a plural cluster of 'Italian cultures'. Yet this new phase carries its own risks, including the potential ghettoization, marginalization and political exploitation which go hand in hand with localist readings of the writing of Italian emigration. The risk is double: the appropriation of writers or works at a regional or even sub-regional level, turning them into some sort of folk heroes; and the corresponding exclusion from both physical and critical circulation at a national level.

The case of di Donato and *Christ in Concrete* is emblematic of these shifts in the perception and political affiliation of Italian American literature and, more broadly, of Italian emigration and the cultural production associated with it in Italy. The novel was translated into Italian for the first time in 1941 for one of the country's leading publishing houses, Bompiani. In October 1939, the English version of the book had

already been introduced to the Italian public through a review written by Elio Vittorini for the popular weekly magazine *Oggi*. Vittorini was one of the leading novelists and intellectuals of that period and played a key role in introducing modernist American writing to Italy, especially through translation. At the time, he was working for Bompiani in Milan and one of his main projects was the production of *Americana*, an anthology of contemporary American literature whose publication was the subject of one of the most notorious cases of Fascist censorship (Billiani 2007: 209-20). Vittorini's review of *Christ in Concrete* was markedly negative and focused on what he described as di Donato's 'tedious old-fashioned psychology' as well as his 'taste for an almost provincial realism', reminiscent of followers of Verga, and 'due perhaps more to bad habit and sluggishness of taste than to an ineluctable personal inclination' (quoted in Marazzi 2004, 179; his translation).

The history of the translation is complex and emblematic of the pressure exercised by the Fascist regime on the cultural industries. The first edition of the volume did not name a translator, though this was later identified as Eva Amendola. It seems, however, that Amendola was not the actual, or at least the sole translator of the work. Martino Marazzi (2000: 55-59; 2004: 311) has suggested that the actual translator may have been an anti-fascist intellectual whose name could not appear in print at the time. Recent research by Marazzi and by Paola Sgobba confirms this hypothesis (Sgobba 2010: 91-92). Eva Kuhn Amendola – the wife of the anti-fascist leader Giovanni Amendola and herself not necessarily *persona grata* to the regime – was best known as a translator from the Russian and does not appear to have worked on English texts (Billiani 2007: 62). The translation may in fact have been, at most, a joint effort, where the bulk of the work was actually carried out by Bruno Maffi, a communist intellectual who was repeatedly sent into internal exile or 'confino' and incarcerated by Mussolini's regime and who was also the translator of Marx's *Capital*.

In spite of the initial strategic silence about the name of the translator, as well as of micro-textual decisions aimed at concealing the communist leanings of di Donato,⁷ the translation was subjected to retroactive censorship: although the publication had initially been authorized, copies were seized shortly afterwards and the book did not reappear until 1944, when it was reissued without substantial changes (Bonsaver 2007: 223-24; Piazzoni 2007: 201-03). In this context, the introduction added to the first edition by the 'editore' (the publisher, i.e. officially Valentino Bompiani, though Marazzi [2004: 22] suggests the piece may actually have been penned by Vittorini) acquires particular resonance:

It is not only because we consider it a good book that we are publishing, in Italian translation, the novel *Christ in Concrete*, written by the Italian-American Pietro Di Donato. There is, in addition to this, a different and profound reason; a reason which would have led us to publish it even if we had not thought it so pleasing. The reader will judge for himself. Formally, the novel is possibly quite distant from our literary forms: it does not display, in its prose, the solemn

elegance of many of our writers; nor, especially in its dialogues, their traditionally accomplished syntax. It does not remind us, in short, of Manzoni, D'Annunzio, or Verga. Yet, as the reader will not fail to see, this is a deeply, spiritually Italian book, as few others, written in the Italian language, can be. Italian is the sentiment that runs through it, from one vertebra to the next. Italian suffering, Italian joy, both taken to the extreme, vibrate in its pages. And its characters suffer in the Italian way, with hot, baking pain, without anguish. Italian is the way in which they rejoice, with impulsive and timeless passions, which come straight from the blood, not from passing excitement. Consider, in this respect, the episode of the celebrations among the emigrants, as well as the countless pages in which the widow and her orphan son cry for their dead husband and father, evoking and invoking him at one and the same time. It is this, more than the external details about the environment in which our emigrants live or the battles they have to fight as sons of the people, that strikes us and captures our hearts. It is their Italianness as an expression of nature, imperiously manifesting itself in the form of a different language – a language which is conquered, not conquering.⁸

[Non soltanto perché lo giudichiamo un bel libro noi pubblichiamo qui, tradotto in italiano, il romanzo *Cristo fra i muratori* dell'italo-americano Pietro Di Donato. V'è, insieme un altro motivo; ed è profondo: un motivo per cui lo avremmo pubblicato anche se non ci fosse sembrato così bello. Vedrà il lettore. Formalmente il romanzo è forse lontano dalle nostre forme letterarie: non ha, nel discorso, l'eleganza solenne di molti nostri scrittori, o, specie nel dialogo, la loro ancor tradizionale compiutezza sintattica. Non si ricollega insomma, nè al Manzoni, nè al D'Annunzio, nè al Verga. Ma intimamente, spiritualmente, lo vedrà bene il lettore, è libro italiano come pochi altri libri di lingua italiana lo sono. Italiano è il sentimento che, di vertebra in vertebra, lo percorre. Sofferenza italiana, gioia italiana, l'una e l'altra all'estremo, vibrano nelle sue pagine. E i personaggi in esso soffrono all'italiana, con caldo dolore che cuoce, senza angoscia; all'italiana gioiscono, con entusiasmi impulsivi e immemori che provengono dal sangue, non da eccitazione. Si considerino, al riguardo, l'episodio della festa tra paesani, e le innumerevoli pagine in cui la vedova o l'orfano piangono il marito e padre morto, ad un tempo evocandolo e invocandolo. Tutto ciò, più che i dati esterni sull'ambiente dei nostri emigrati e sulle lotte loro di figli del popolo, ci colpisce e appassiona. È l'italianità come natura, che si manifesta prepotentemente nell'aspetto di un altro linguaggio: conquistato, non conquistatore.]

(1941: 5)

Elsewhere, in the blurbs added to the covers, the novel is described as being 'as rough as a piece of uncut granite' ['Rude come un pezzo di granito non ancora squadrato'], and as marked by 'expression devoid of all technique, born out of the harsh life, the self-contained silences and the dense articulation of the workman' ['periodare

spoglio di qualsiasi tecnica, nato dalla vita dura, dai silenzi contenuti e dal discorrere denso dell'operaio']. Additionally, the biography of di Donato is given prominence and is presented as a story of collective tragedy and personal heroism. The reading suggested by the paratext therefore foregrounds the interpretation of *Christ in Concrete* as an Italian emigrant's autobiography, stressing (perhaps inevitably, given the Fascist context) the plight of Italian migrants, their exploitation, and, of course, their enduring 'Italianness'.

The 1941 translation was repeatedly reprinted, first by Bompiani and then by Mondadori, over the following decades. While the text did not change, the paratext did. The publisher's preface eventually disappeared, substituted by new introductions and blurbs. The ones produced by Edmondo Aroldi for the 1973 Mondadori edition are emblematic of the new political and cultural context. His introduction stresses *Christ in Concrete's* position among 'the most significant works of that social literature which flourished in the United States during the 1930s' ['le opere più significative nell'ambito della letteratura sociale fiorita negli Stati Uniti negli anni trenta'] (back cover) and is built on two premises: on the one hand, the fact that, if anything, the Italian reader would be familiar with Edward Dmytryck's 1949 film adaptation of di Donato's novel;⁹ and on the other (but coherently with the foregrounding of Dmytryck's work) the association of the book with a strong anti-American message:

At times imbued with populism, Pietro Di Donato's work, which is autobiographical down to the last little detail, never goes beyond the limits of the reportage denouncing a thankless America, thick with social contradiction, trapped within the false equilibrium of puritanical moral hypocrisy. Neither explicitly nor through veiled allusions does *Christ in Concrete* ever become a *roman à thèse*, or a political novel. Rather, it aims to be a finger pointed against ills which have to disappear, which in a modern society should not even exist. In this respect, *Christ in Concrete* still maintains all its relevance today.

[A volte di un populismo palpitante, l'opera di Pietro Di Donato, autobiografica fin nei più minuziosi particolari, non oltrepassa mai le misure del 'dossier' di denuncia a carico di un'America ingrata, irta di contraddizioni sociali, chiusa nel falso equilibrio dell'ipocrisia morale puritana; né esplicitamente né velatamente, *Cristo fra i muratori* diventa mai un romanzo a tesi o un romanzo politico, intende essere piuttosto un dito puntato su piaghe che devono scomparire, che in una società modernamente organizzata non dovrebbero nemmeno esistere. In questa direzione, *Cristo fra i muratori* conserva tutta la sua attualità.]

(1973: 7)

This anti-American interpretation, based on the re-appropriation of the history (and the stories) of Italian emigration can also be found in more recent commentaries on di Donato's work, such as the following description, taken from the website associated with a well known textbook for Italian as a foreign language:

Pietro Di Donato himself remains a character within the great history of our emigration. An outstanding author committed to denouncing social injustice; an undisputed member of a literary generation which also produced the great voices of John Fante, Pascal D'Angelo and Mario Puzo; this son of the harsh history of Italian emigration, impartial witness to the huge social injustice which characterized America at the start of the century [...] has unfortunately lost some of his appeal over time [...]

[Lo stesso Pietro Di Donato rimane un personaggio sospeso nella grande storia della nostra emigrazione. Grandissimo autore di denuncia sociale, indiscusso esponente di una stagione letteraria italoamericana esaltata anche da John Fante, Pascal D'Angelo e Mario Puzo, questo figlio della dura emigrazione italiana, testimone obiettivo delle grandi ingiustizie sociali americane di inizio secolo [...] non ha avuto fortuna nella gara del tempo [...]]

(Superciaoit)

In parallel with these national, Italo-centric readings, a localist or regionalist image of di Donato and of his work has also emerged in Italy over the past few decades. A number of associations based in the Abruzzi have turned to di Donato as an icon of the region's history of emigration and any Google search for his name will produce a substantial number of web pages marked by a distinctly 'local' flavour.¹⁰

This move from a national to a more restricted horizon of reception can also be observed in the new translation of *Christ in Concrete* by Letizia Prisco which appeared in 2001 for Il Grappolo, a small publishing house based in the Southern Italian town of Mercato S. Severino. The size and geographical location of the publisher signal a more limited, niche target audience, yet, paradoxically, they also point to new, transnational perspectives, since the publisher has direct contacts with US-based scholars of Italian American studies (especially Luigi Fontanella). The direct link between this new translation and the renewed interest in di Donato fostered by the growth of Italian American studies in the US is also signalled by the fact that the only critical apparatus included in the Il Grappolo edition is in itself a translation: an Italian version of Fred Gardaphé's introduction to the 1993 English edition of the novel. This translation accompanying a translation underlines a move towards the inscription of *Christ in Concrete* in the context of Italian American literature, even within an Italian critical horizon and when the target audience is constituted by Italian readers.

Conclusions: class, nation and hyphenation

As highlighted above, the two main readings of *Christ in Concrete* have regularly focused either on its social and political dimensions or on its ethnic ones. Ultimately, these readings are not antithetical, nor incompatible, in spite of the fact that each one of them has tended to dominate in different places and at different times. In fact, with its generic and linguistic hybridity, di Donato's masterpiece seems a perfect fit for the

definition of minor literature offered by Deleuze and Guattari (1986). According to their description, a minor literature is the one written by a minority in the language of a majority. This kind of writing always has a political and collective, as well as individual, nature. And, ultimately, this deterritorialized form of art is also the most innovative form of literary production.

Considering *Christ in Concrete* and other such works emerging from the experience of migration as minor literature has a number of significant consequences. It opens up a new space in the Italian cultural context, releasing Italian American writing (or its reappropriation by Italian audiences) from the ghettoizing risks of localism and, at the same time, from straight annexation into the canon of national literature. Instead, the minor literature label points to other possible interpretations, which focus on the complex genesis and circulation of works of this kind, and invite us to read them as eminent examples of transnational writing. Emily Apter (2001) has cautioned, however, that the transnational label can indicate widely differing things, including the kind of 'literary product' which, like pop music bands and television series, is intentionally produced to be sold on the global market. In the case of di Donato, on the contrary, what we have is a form of writing in which what Apter calls a 'translational transnationalism' (5) is always already inscribed in the texture of the work, from the very moment of its inception; a writing which is marked by polylingualism, multiple cultural references, complex language politics and processes of self-translation. That transnational nature can then be enhanced by further translation, in this case into a language – Italian – which already had a link with and a presence in the original text.

In his discussion of world literature, David Damrosch gives a 'threefold definition' of this type of writing:

1. World literature is an elliptical refraction of national literatures.
 2. World literature is writing that gains in translation.
 3. World literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time.
- (2003: 281)

He also states that 'a work enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being read *as* literature; second, by circulating into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin' (6). These definitions seem particularly suitable for works such as *Christ in Concrete*, in which translation (as self- as well as hetero-translation),¹¹ and also transnational circulation (in the sense of the inscription within multiple cultures) was always already present, even before (and as one of the reasons for) its move beyond the boundaries of more restrictive categories such as American, Italian, or Italian American literature. If we reverse the perspective, we can also note that the acknowledgement of strong links with the history of both migration and translation could defuse at least some of the hegemonic risks implicit in the concept of world literature (and patently present in its history, from Goethe's formulation of the concept

to most of today's reinterpretations, including those proposed by Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova).

The kind of world literature which emerges from migration, polylingual writing and multiple translation processes is always already 'minor' – which means that it is also political, strategic, and capable of circulating between peripheries as well as of reaching the centres of our global cultural maps.

Endnotes

¹ All references will be to the 1993 edition of the novel. I also follow this version for the spelling of di Donato's surname, although other versions (Di Donato and occasionally DiDonato) have appeared in print and will be left unchanged in quotations.

² In line with recent scholarship, I will not hyphenate the label 'Italian American', except in relevant quotations. Nevertheless, I will occasionally refer to hyphenated literatures and hyphenated identities as these definitions were (and to an extent are still) in use during the period covered in this article. On the debate surrounding this terminology see Durante (2001: 5).

³ 'Ethnic' rather than 'national' is clearly the appropriate word here, since in the US context the label 'Italian American' forms part of a discourse (and a debate) about ethnicity, and finds itself in opposition to the un-hyphenated 'American' (which stands, in this case, precisely for 'national'). Things will change, at least in part, when we look at the critical reception of di Donato in Italy, where 'national' and 'regional' rather than 'ethnic' become the key words of the opposition.

⁴ I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers of the initial version of this article, who effectively proved this point for me by remarking that 'to understand the impact of di Donato's work, the author needs to look at it in terms of its US context, to compare it with other ethnic novels like Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, published in the same year. The US-based Italianists are unlikely to carry out this sort of research because they are not Americanists, not scholars of American literature.'

⁵ On this definition see for instance Lajolo (1983: 105).

⁶ See for instance the work of Francesco Durante or, more recently, of Martino Marazzi.

⁷ At a crucial point in the novel, for instance, di Donato describes Christ as a 'comrade-worker' (137), but the expression was turned into the much less charged 'compagno di lavoro' in Italian (1941: 193).

⁸ This and other translations are mine, unless otherwise stated.

⁹ Dmytryck was one of the Hollywood directors blacklisted during the McCarthy era for their political ideas. His adaptation of di Donato's novel was filmed in London and appeared in 1949; it was initially known with the title *Give Us This Day*.

¹⁰ See for instance the page 'Emigrazione abruzzese e letteratura' (D'Angelo n.d.), the page on di Donato on the website *Siamoabruzzesi* (D'Alessandro n.d.), or even the Premio giornalistico Pietro di Donato sulla sicurezza in ambiente di lavoro (n.d.).

¹¹ For this terminology see Cronin 2000 and 2006.

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