

# **'My own flesh and blood, old Nick': John Fante's Domestic Devils**

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I have never understood why people who can swallow the enormous improbability of a personal God boggle at a personal Devil. I have known so intimately the way that demon works in my imagination.

Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair*

John Fante is perhaps best remembered as *Ask the Dust's* (1939) chronicler of sun-baked, strung-out Los Angeles street life. A great number of his stories and novels, however, are set against the altogether different landscape of snow-covered small-town Colorado. These are tales deeply rooted in Fante's own boyhood as the eldest child of a poor Italian-American family in the town of Boulder in the 1910s and 1920s. Anthony Julian Tamburri puts it simply: they are stories which 'celebrate their ethnicity and cultural origin [by] tell[ing] of the trials and tribulations of Italian immigrants and their children'.<sup>1</sup> These meditations on the transient joys of childhood and the disquieting epiphanies of growing up between two cultures are populated by thoughtful, frustrated (male) children, intensely religious mothers, and unreliable fathers who regularly bring their families to the brink of financial ruin.

Although they vary from story to story, these character types return time and again in Fante's Colorado tales, as I will show, alongside another recurring figure: God. Catholic guilt and the horror of potential damnation loom large in these tableaux of working-class Italian-American existence, as indicated by even a cursory glance at some of their titles. The posthumous anthology *The Wine of Youth* includes 'First Communion', 'Altar Boy', 'The Road to Hell', 'The Wrath of God', 'Hail Mary' (all these originally collected in 1940's *Dago Red*), 'A Nun No More', and 'My Father's God'.<sup>2</sup> The theme of Catholic faith, specifically a particularly devout, literalist belief in God, miracles, and Heaven and Hell as tangible physical entities,<sup>3</sup> is such a familiar one in Fante's work that it has also become something of a commonplace in Fante studies. Scholars including Fred L. Gardaphé, Catherine Kordich, Rocco Marinaccio, and Stephen Cooper have all addressed the theme of religion in Fante's work.<sup>4</sup>

It is perhaps surprising then that the obvious and necessary counterpart to the fear of God – that is, a fear of the Devil, tempter of the good Christian and tormenter of the failed one – has thus far escaped the attentions of Fante criticism. In partial redress, I will here attempt to demonstrate that in a significant number of Fante's writings the Devil is every bit as prevalent and vital a presence as God. Moreover, I will argue that such a foregrounding of the Devil in a new reading of these texts significantly recontextualises the intersection between two of Fante's other major themes: the role of fathers as viewed by their sons, and the economic privations endured by Italian immigrant families in early twentieth-century America.

'The Orgy' is a tale of a typical Colorado-dwelling son of Italian immigrants whose bricklaying father is improbably given the deed to a goldmine by his hod-carrier, a sharply-dressed African-American gambler named Speed Blivins, who has just won big on the stock market.<sup>5</sup> The boy's Papa and his best friend, a coarse, heavy-drinking, truculent atheist called Frank Gagliano, begin making weekend excursions to the mine, but these trips

prove fruitless. The boy's devout, quintessentially Fantean mother, who is terrified and disgusted by Frank's faithlessness, becomes suspicious and insists upon the boy accompanying the men on one of their trips. When he does so, his mother's worst fears are confirmed, as his Papa and Frank are joined by an unfamiliar woman named Rhoda Pruitt for the titular congress – a bathetic Bacchanal held in a frozen shack reeking of 'urine and bowel gas, of mouldy mattresses and cooking grease'.<sup>6</sup>

The Devil looms large throughout 'The Orgy', as a persistent, imminent and palpable threat to the boy's world, and is initially identified with Frank, who is regarded by the boy's mother as an 'evil disciple of the Devil', his allegiance to a 'sinister philosophy' further alluded to in his left-handedness.<sup>7</sup> Such is Mama's certainty of Frank's alliance with Satan that she fears her husband too will be dragged towards Hell by his friend's influence and that, indeed, this is Frank's express design. She 'saw the mine as a satanic hole [...] where an evil atheist lured a good Christian man'.<sup>8</sup>

It is clear that for Mama the fear of a Satanic presence in the household is intimately bound up another great anxiety common to Fante's Colorado matriarchs. This is the fear that even the household's most basic needs may come to exceed her husband's meagre, inconsistent means and that in consequence she will be unable in her role as homemaker to prevent the family from passing from the realm of mere financial insecurity (termed 'comfortable poverty' by the narrator) and into that of outright penury.<sup>9</sup> Such a fear recurs in the figure of the terrified mother facing the grocer to whom the family is indebted in the story 'Charge It'.<sup>10</sup> It is also the fear of the boy in 'A Wife for Dino Rossi', for whom the delicious smell of ravioli on a day other than Christmas or Easter causes only suspicion and anxiety, so rarely can his family countenance such an indulgence.<sup>11</sup> It is the terror of Grandma Bettina in the posthumously-published *1933 Was a Bad Year* (1985), who has "'travelled five thousand miles in steerage to a barbarian land'", only to find "'hunger and men

walking the streets, [...] your father without a job for seven months".<sup>12</sup> It is the shame of the weeping mother in the story 'Altar Boy', lying to her son that the embarrassing wreck of a second-hand bike he has been given on St Joseph's Day is only in such a condition because it 'got ruined on the way down from Heaven'.<sup>13</sup>

'The Orgy' is set during a single summer, and thus unlike some of Fante's other stories (e.g. in 'Bricklayer in the Snow',<sup>14</sup> or the aforementioned *1933 Was a Bad Year*<sup>15</sup>) need not address the existential risks of economic dependency upon the seasonal vicissitudes of the building trade. As such, the family in 'The Orgy' is less conspicuously marked by hardship than some of its counterparts in the Fante corpus. Nevertheless, even here there are clear signs that the spectre of privation is a constant concern.

More significant is the reason that Mama tolerates Papa's friendship with Frank: it is an 'economic fact of life she had to accept'. Mama accepts that the family's subsistence, contingent as it is upon the construction business itself, is by extension also contingent upon Frank, because he works on the same sites and crews as Papa and is therefore irremovable from their lives. She understands that the only way to exorcise Gagliano's dangerous presence from her family's world would be for her husband to abandon his employment in the only trade he knows, and that this is impossible. Mama's accession to the 'economic fact' of Frank's dangerous, spiritually-contaminant presence is thus the result of weighing the metaphysical terror of possible damnation against the more proximate concerns of day-to-day hardship. Even the story's moral and spiritual arbiter is forced to concede that the temporal-but-immediate must take precedence over the eternal-but-deferred: the worldly fear overpowers the supernatural one – even though the Mama's own belief system dictates that the ramifications of the latter are of far greater consequence.

In light of this, it is worth noting that the form of Catholicism practised by Italian-Americans in the early twentieth-

century was itself marked by a particularly complex relationship between economic and spiritual outcomes. Some insight on this unique religious culture can be found in William Foote Whyte's landmark participant observation study of an urban Italian-American community, *Street Corner Society* (1943). Whyte remarks upon the significance of the *Festa*, the annual celebration dedicated to a community's patron saint, in understanding the complex consanguinity between the spiritual and the worldly (specifically, the financial) in the belief systems of these communities.<sup>16</sup> The *Festa* was a social phenomenon defined by monetary transactions: first in the soliciting of donations from the (typically poor) community by the organising committee prior to the event, and then most strikingly the practice of making monetary donations to the statue of the saint as it was carried through the streets. These were donations with a dual meaning: they paid for earthly things – the festival itself and the maintenance of local religious institutions – but were also understood to have divine currency. One of Whyte's interviewees explains this practice thus:

Yes, God knows everything, but we are weak sinners. Why should he grant us the favors that we ask? [...] If the sinner prays to the saint, the saint stands in right with God, and God takes pity upon the sinner and forgives him his sins. That is the spiritual world. It is the same way in the material world except that here we are dealing with material things. If you drive a car, and the policeman stops you for speeding and gives you a ticket, you don't wait till you go before the judge. You go to [...] some person of influence [...] Perhaps the captain knows your brother [...] Out of friendship he will forgive you.<sup>17</sup>

Whyte provocatively asks his interlocutor if 'paying the captain to drop the matter was the same thing as giving money to

the saint in the procession'. His respondent's rebuttal is firm yet, tellingly, only partial. He protests that 'that's different', and '[y]ou cannot buy a favour from God' – but in the same breath concedes that the donation to the saint is a way 'to show your faith', having already explained that it is by showing one's faith to the saint that one hopes the saint will intercede with God.<sup>18</sup> Thus the *Festa* denotes an explicit connection in early twentieth-century Italian-American Catholicism between being in good standing financially (i.e. having the wherewithal to make a socially-respectable donation to the saint) and being in good standing with God. Earthly capital is necessary collateral for the extension of a divine line of credit.

The ancestral culture of the *Festa* intervenes idiosyncratically in yet older and still-unresolved arguments within Christianity more broadly as to the status, role and significance of poverty in religious life. The awkward superposition thereon of early twentieth-century Italian-American Catholicism's saint cults, with their idiosyncratic and explicit relationship between financial means and the fate of one's soul, represents the subtext and intertext of the near-impossible situation in which Mama of 'The Orgy' finds herself regarding the simultaneous economic necessity and spiritual danger of Frank's presence within her family's life. When the acquisition of wealth and goods can simultaneously be a temptation of the Devil, a prerequisite for achieving intercession with God via a saint, *and* a necessary part of keeping one's family alive and healthy, the question of what poverty means becomes fraught with difficulty.

For Fante's Colorado matriarchs therefore no "straightforward" binary choice (if such a choice could ever be so called) exists between spiritual and worldly prosperity – the fear of penury (while remaining devout) or the fear of damnation (while preserving a more comfortable standard of living on earth). This is because, as Whyte makes clear, this is a socio-religious culture in which God, no less so than the impatient local grocer, may wish to settle in cash. In the Fante texts I will discuss in the

following sections of this paper I find that that the complex intersection between these twin fears (damnation and privation) is located regularly within the figure of the family's father. This is because he embodies both the principal threat to the family's economic fate (as an unreliable sole breadwinner) *and* makes threateningly corporeal the threat to its spiritual fate – as time and again Fante aligns his father figures with images of the Devil.

This begins to become clear throughout 'The Orgy', as an extended act of misdirection betrays itself and both the boy and the reader start to apprehend that the truly Satanic figure may not be Frank, as per Mama's initial suspicions, but in fact Papa himself. In the very first scene we see that Frank is calmly unaffected by Mama's righteous tirade against him, but her husband is visibly 'disgusted' and averts his eyes, 'blotting out the scene' as she cleanses her home with holy water after Gagliano has visited.<sup>19</sup> It is then her husband's face in which she throws a handful of the holy water, further heightening the sense that he, not Frank, might be the real evil to be expelled.

As the family prays for success at the mine the phenomenon of the saint cult, as referred to in Whyte's discussion of the *Festa* and more recently detailed by Salvatore Primeggia, is invoked by Papa, who implores his children not to petition God but saints, the more obscure the better.<sup>20</sup> As characteristic of Italian-American Catholicism in this period as saint cults were, there is something curious in Papa's determination to reject God so completely as a possible source of divine benevolence. God, Papa claims, is '[n]ot lucky [... He] never done a thing for me yet'.<sup>21</sup> The boy asks him point-blank if he believes in God; Papa refuses to answer.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, when one of his children declares he will pray to St Joseph, reasoning that, as a carpenter, Joseph will intercede for a fellow member of the building trade, Papa rejects this suggestion with a curt dismissal: 'I don't like carpenters'.<sup>23</sup> It is impossible to ignore that such a wholesale distaste for the carpentry profession must necessarily include its

most famous exponent: St Joseph's "stepson" and the Devil's great adversary, Jesus Christ himself.

Papa's preferred choice is San Gennaro, who is patron saint of Naples and, Papa claims, has aided him in the past. Hiding within this apparent display of hagiographic knowledge, however, is another subtle suggestion of a rejection of God. San Gennaro, referred to by his Latin name of Sanctus Januarius, is the subject of a poem and the title of a book in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*,<sup>24</sup> and it is in *The Gay Science* that Nietzsche first declared that 'God is dead'.<sup>25</sup> There is no suggestion that Papa has read Nietzsche, but Fante was a devoted disciple of his work, especially in his youth, and as such it is difficult to dismiss the allusion as coincidental. Stephen Cooper has noted Nietzsche's major foundational influence on Fante's writing and personal philosophy.

Hand in hand with his conversion to [H.L.] Menckanism came Fante's autodidactic encounter with [...] the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche [...] Fante passed into a thoroughgoing if unsystematic immersion in several of Nietzsche's principal works.<sup>26</sup>

Though in later years Fante became more circumspect in his appreciation of Nietzsche's work, the German philosopher nonetheless remained 'one of Fante's gods'.<sup>27</sup>

As the boy approaches the mine alongside Papa and Frank, the Devil makes his most explicit appearance yet:

Crowning it all was the sign on the roof over the door. It was painted on a sheet of plywood, the figure of a devil done in red and black, with horns, hooves, and a speared serpentine tail. His eyes were slanted and his mouth was screwed into a grin. Beneath was the inscription:

RED DEVIL MINING CORP.

VICO STEFFANINI AND FRANK  
GAGLIANO, PROP.<sup>28</sup>

The boy's reaction to this fearlessly God-baiting display is one of terror and bewilderment: 'You didn't show off a devil. [...] It was frightening. It was madness'.<sup>29</sup> As he attempts to make sense of this, there follows a further play of misdirection as to who is identified most closely with the figure on the sign. Again, the initial connection is with Frank, who happily declares the painted Devil – 'old Red' – to be his 'buddy'.<sup>30</sup> By this point in the tale, however, we are aware that Frank's temperament is so abrasive that he seems only to have one real 'buddy' – Papa. The text is clear that they are 'best friend[s]'.<sup>31</sup> Given this, Frank's declaration of friendship with the Devil on the signboard takes on an insidious new meaning; if Papa is Frank's only friend, then to reveal that the Devil is his 'buddy' is to admit that Papa and the Devil are one and the same. To reverse and re-parse the syntax, his buddy is the Devil.

The name on the sign is also revealing. Whilst the boy's father is usually referred to simply as 'Papa', he is also called 'Nick' by Rhoda Pruitt. On the sign, however, he is 'Vico Steffanini', and the story never confirms his true name. One of the Devil's defining characteristics in scripture and folklore alike is a propensity for shifting, false guises, and he is known by a lengthy list of pseudonyms and epithets. Triple-named Nick/Vico/Papa seems to exhibit something of the same quality here; moreover, one of the Devil's popular sobriquets (Nick or Old Nick) is also one of his own – a fact to which I will return.

As Papa attempts to duck responsibility for the presence of the painted Devil, another grammatical sleight of hand appears superficially to locate the Satanic association with Frank while in fact subtly redirecting it once more to Papa.

'Frank's idea,' my father said guiltily. 'It don't mean a thing.'

Maybe not, but as I glanced at him again he looked like the king of the mountain and a long time resident of those parts.<sup>32</sup>

The use of the pronoun 'him' rather than a specific name, in addition to the fact that it is Papa with whom the boy is conversing, creates an ambiguity as to whom the 'glance' is directed. In both grammatical and narrative context, the sentence can be read with equal sense whether the subject of the glance - 'the king of the mountain and a long time resident of those parts' - is the Devil on the sign or Papa himself. In refusing to assign itself with certainty to either figure, the sentence generates a dual consciousness, extending the possibility that it in fact refers to both, suggesting a closeness of association between Papa and the Devil by superimposing them in the same grammatical space.

Another failure to read accurately the relationship between Frank, Papa and the Devil occurs when Mama tells Papa about a troubling dream:

'It was a sign from God. You were down at the bottom of the mine, and he was throwing big rocks at you, burying you alive.'

This reflects the boy's aforementioned understanding that Mama believes the mine to be a 'satanic hole' to which Frank 'lures' Papa. Given, however, the long-held familiar identification of Hell as a place "under the earth" or associated with a descent into darkness,<sup>33</sup> and persistently implied within the text by the association of the mine with the Devil, the image from Mama's dream is problematic. If the mine, as a 'satanic hole', is identified with Hell, the Devil's notionally underground home, surely the person located within and identified with the bottom of the pit, i.e. Papa, is the truly Devilish figure. It is Papa, not Frank, who

owns the figurative Hell of the mine; he is granted the deeds and invites Frank to join his enterprise. If anybody is being 'lured' to the mine it is Frank, not Papa. This sense also bears upon the boy's own wish to see Frank 'condemned [...] to the depths of hell [where] he would cook [...] in a great cauldron of hot oil, with the gleeful devil dancing about'.<sup>34</sup> If Frank can be condemned *to* Hell, he cannot be "of" Hell to begin with; given he cannot logically be the 'gleeful devil' of his own tormenting, we might ask who that might be. Once more, apparent connections between Frank and the Devil in fact reveal Papa's Satanic association to be the far closer and more coherent one.

The boy awakes in the squalid mountain cabin to the sound of the three adults' voices. He runs, 'enchanted by the sense of evil' in the best Gothic tradition, unable to resist the call of the terrifying mystery even as he dimly senses the doom it portends.<sup>35</sup> Sure enough the boy soon finds Frank, Papa and Rhoda at the mouth of the mineshaft, 'grunting and sucking and squirming in the naked heavy slithering of arms and legs'.<sup>36</sup> Immediately there is a Satanic image – they are 'like a ball of squirming white snakes' – followed by the boy's ultimate realisation of the truth that the text has been inviting him (and us) to recognise: 'I saw my father's face. It was the face of the devil on the door.'<sup>37</sup> The boy begins madly dousing the adults with holy water. Grappling with the shocking new possibility that his father is not an innocent man assuaged by the Devil but in fact the Satanic host himself, he is unsure whether he must kill the Devil to prevent his father from being attacked, or exorcise the Devil from within his father, and alternates wildly between the two possibilities: 'drive the devil out, kill the devil, save my father, free my father!'<sup>38</sup>

Afterwards, the boy attempts to rationalise what has happened, to deny his epiphany of the Devil within his father and instead to assign all culpability to Frank Gagliano. The desperately circular logic of his attempt, however, reveals its futility: 'he was my father and he could not have done that, for he was my father and some things were not possible'.<sup>39</sup> Such attempts at self-

deception fail because they cannot erase a tell-tale physical reminder of his earlier encounter with his father's transmogrified Satanic state, recalling the long-standing folkloric image of the Devil as having cloven hooves, or being goat-like: 'his thick calloused hand [...] was like the hoof of an animal.'<sup>40</sup>

'The Orgy' is perhaps Fante's most explicit and sustained engagement with the Devil as a personage identified with the figure of the father, but the association between fathers and the image of Satan recurs in several other Fante texts. In 'The Road to Hell', Sister Mary Joseph instructs a class of children on the confessional, illustrating her lesson with an account of 'the Kid', a boy 'spurred on by the coaxing of Lucifer' to commit the 'grievous sin' of stealing a baseball glove'.<sup>41</sup> When the nun invites the class to speculate as to her narrative's outcome, the male students are certain that he took the glove, having found 'the words of Satan more powerful than the words of his Guardian Angel'.<sup>42</sup> The narrator, whose 'folks were poor people', reasons from his own experience that the Kid stole the glove on grounds of his parents' poverty<sup>43</sup>. The narrator's friend Clyde does not suffer from parental hardship, but draws upon his own experience of over-cautious parents who discourage him from playing baseball to suggest that the Kid 'swiped [the glove] because his folks wouldn't let him have one'.<sup>44</sup>

Intriguingly, in both boys' accounts it is a parental characteristic or action that provides an apparently irresistible earthly causation for the supernaturally-attributed temptation. At no point, however, do they deny or derogate the literal role of the Devil in the tempting: the narrator 'know[s] how that Kid felt', because he has 'listened to the Devil plenty'.<sup>45</sup> The earthly explanation is not a substitute for or a rationalisation of the supernatural one; they sit alongside each other, equally real, equally proximate, operating in concert. There is a clear suggestion in the children's logic, then, that parental and Satanic temptation are equally strong, and moreover so inextricably linked as to be indistinguishable from each other. Even Sister

Mary Joseph gestures towards this possibility of co-operative parental-Satanic temptation when her telling of the Kid's story allows the Devil to speak on behalf of the Kid's father, articulating a supernatural enticement in terms of its earthly counterpart. As the nun's Devil puts it, "'Now tell me where *you'll* get five dollars! It's a cinch your father hasn't got it.'"<sup>46</sup>

This dynamic is revisited when the Kid's friends ask him how he obtained the glove. He embarks on a series of increasingly outlandish explanations but his first instinct is to claim that 'his father had got it'.<sup>47</sup> Certainly, this in one sense incorrect and is accordingly described as 'Lie Number One'. Given, however, that the Kid obtained the glove by dint of the Devil, a statement that he received it from his father can be read with equal sense as a suggestion that his father *is* the Devil (a grammatical slipperiness recalling Frank Gagliano's blithe revelation in 'The Orgy' that the signboard Devil is 'his buddy' (i.e. Papa)). That such connections appear even in a story in which Sister Mary Joseph claims the father to be 'a pious man with a horror of evil' only heightens the sense that this strange father-Devil axis has a terrifyingly insidious persistence whereby it is able to articulate itself even where the narrative context should form a periapt against it.<sup>48</sup> Even in a tale told by a nun for its devoutly conventional instructive value, the troubling unbidden counternarrative – that fathers and the Devil might be kin – finds a way to reveal itself.

The young Arturo Bandini of Fante's 1938 novel *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* is yet another poor boy whose determination to escape the Devil is stymied by the nagging suspicion that Satan lives very close to home indeed. Arturo is a speculator and calculator of sin: a pragmatic altar boy, his devotion to religious study is rooted in an almost taxonomic determination to understand fully the relative severity of different sins, what they entail and the punishments they incur. Through such diligence Arturo aims minimise his time in purgatory, and at the very least avoid Hell:

He always got to confession on time – that is, before he died. [...] So Arturo was pretty sure he wouldn't go to hell when he died. For two reasons. The confessional, and the fact that he was a fast runner.<sup>49</sup>

The young Arturo is far from sinless, but it is precisely because he studiously catalogues his many misdemeanours, weighing them against the catechism, that he proves to be one of Fante's most religiously credulous, sincerely devout and God-fearing protagonists:

Sixty-eight mortal sins in one week, from the Second Commandment alone. Wow! [...] He listened in alarm to the beat of his heart, wondering if it would stop and he drop dead before he got those things off his chest [...] Venial sins? Mortal sins? The classifications pestered him. The number of sins against [the Fourth Commandment] exhausted him; he would count them to the hundreds as he examined his days hour by hour.<sup>50</sup>

This attitude is set in constant dramatic opposition to a father who, even by the low standards of Fante's usual flawed patriarchs, is a man of overwhelming shortcomings. Svevo Bandini is a heretic outcast, raging against a God whose existence he by turns denies and blames for his misfortunes. Svevo jeopardises the security and wellbeing of his family by drinking and gambling away his earnings; he runs up vast debts and places his wife in the humiliating position of having to ask the grocer to extend already long-overdue credit. Unable to face either the consequences of such actions or the imminent visit of his mother-in-law, Svevo walks out on the family for ten days immediately prior to Christmas, abandoning the saintly Maria for a rich widow. Even when Svevo eventually returns, on Christmas Eve, he does so with a complete refusal to acknowledge his wrongs, instead

showing 'defiance in his jaw' and inflaming the situation further (while claiming innocent intentions) by brandishing money obtained from the widow.<sup>51</sup>

Svevo routinely 'scorn[s] the Mass', reasoning that if God is everywhere he may be found just as readily in the poolhall; moreover, Svevo seems to take an impish delight in the consternation such provocations cause, blithely unconcerned at the way his wife 'shuddered in horror at this piece of theology'.<sup>52</sup> Fante casts Svevo's heresy into sharp relief against Arturo, who is wowed by his father's boldness and shares some of his reluctance to attend church, but by contrast with God-goading Svevo finds that when 'he did not go, a great fear clutched him, and he was miserable and frightened until he had got it off his chest in the confessional'.<sup>53</sup> By continually showing Svevo Bandini committing with impunity and without fear of eternal consequence the very sorts of sins that his son Arturo expends so much time and anguish in avoiding, Fante creates the impression that Bandini Sr. can only be, like Blake's Milton, 'of the Devil's party'.<sup>54</sup>

Hints of Svevo's allegiances are apparent from the novel's very first pages. In a description of his shoulder muscles he is, we are told, a man with 'snakes inside', alluding to the Biblical serpent just as the climactic scene of 'The Orgy' does.<sup>55</sup> (The image will recur again later, when Svevo's wife sees 'the serpent of guilt that wound itself into the ghastly figure of his face'.<sup>56</sup>) Svevo repeats a curse, striking in its brazen blasphemy and enmity towards the almighty: '*Dio cane. Dio cane.* It means God is a dog'.<sup>57</sup> Another curse of choice is '*Diavolo!* (Devil), but it seems telling that where '*Dio cane*' is always used to express a vengeful fury, '*Diavolo!*' by contrast is invoked in circumstances in which Svevo seeks assistance to calm his temper or manage a situation, as when he trips over Arturo's sled or struggles with his shoelaces<sup>58</sup>.

More troublingly, Svevo even appears to carry the uncanny power of some life-draining curse:

At birth he had stolen [his eyes] from his mother – for after the birth of Svevo Bandini, his mother was never quite the same, always ill, always with sickly eyes after his birth, and then she died and it was Svevo's turn to carry soft brown eyes.<sup>59</sup>

In the very act of emerging from the womb Svevo Bandini apparently commits some kind of metaphysical assault on his mother which causes her to die shortly after by somehow consuming her life-force through her eyes (recalling simultaneously the proverbial window to the soul, the old Italian peasant belief in the curse of the *mal' occhio* (evil eye),<sup>60</sup> and the Biblical exhortation that 'the light of thy body is thy eye').<sup>61</sup> One can scarcely imagine a more ill-omened entrance into the world and the narrative. Indeed, it suggests both the longstanding folklore around demonically- or Satanically-possessed children (later exploited to great effect by horror literature and cinema), and Milton's allegory of Death, son of Satan, who is birthed by Sin (herself Satan's daughter), only to ravage her immediately.<sup>62</sup> Even if Svevo has somehow consumed his mother's soul, however, his own remains chillingly difficult to locate. It is said that Svevo's long suffering-wife Maria has a particular ability to sense the souls of others, 'a woman who looked upon all the living and the dead as soul, [she] knew what a soul was', yet even she, despite her gift, 'never saw his soul'.<sup>63</sup> Throughout Svevo's introduction, the holy-named Maria is associated with the word 'white' at least eight times in just two pages, while Svevo walks through a blanket of white snow<sup>64</sup>. Again, he stands in sharp relief, the monstrous character outlined above as the only dark blot compromising a pure white landscape and a pure white Madonna figure. The novel's opening pages, then, present a father as a dark contaminant of the pristine, a God-cursing, serpentine life-devourer who killed his own mother in the act of his birth and

may even lack a soul entirely. There may be no literal sign of the Devil as in 'The Orgy', but it is difficult to conceive of a more demonic introduction.

Svevo is an extreme example of Fante's Devil-father figure, but many others retain an echo of his characteristics, or those of Vico in 'The Orgy': from Nick Molise of *The Brotherhood of the Grape*,<sup>65</sup> to Peter Molise of *1933 Was a Bad Year*,<sup>66</sup> the male elders in stories like 'A Bad Woman',<sup>67</sup> 'Bricklayer in the Snow',<sup>68</sup> and many others. Perhaps none of Fante's other father characters attain quite the heightened sense of the Satanic that Svevo and Vico display, but whilst not all of Fante's fathers are devils, they are certainly all devilish. By this I refer to the sense of chaos they bring to each narrative, a puckish lack of regard to the consequences for others of their actions, a reckless unpredictability and in many cases a disregard for conventional (Christian) morality, embodied as ever in drinking, gambling and/or adultery. In this, while perhaps not embodying Satan as fully and directly as Vico or Svevo, they still represent the Devil by virtue of being the biggest intrusion of sin and temptation into the lives of their families, their biggest obstacle to living virtuous Christian existences. These less fearsome figures of Fante's patriarchal demonology still cause difficulty and hardship to those around them, but are jocular, vital devils recalling Falstaff – 'that old white bearded Satan'<sup>69</sup> – or prefiguring Philip Roth's Mickey Sabbath<sup>70</sup>.

Even in Fante's Los Angeles-set 1952 novel *Full of Life*, regarded as one of his very lightest works, when the protagonist and narrator 'John Fante' invites his retired bricklayer father into his home to fix a collapsed floor, chaos is unleashed upon the domestic idyll. Fante Sr. proves to be an ornery, contrary imp, a minor demon but a demon nonetheless: he drinks to excess, undermines John's relationship with his wife, and even turns the local priest against his son with his loquacious charm. Yet John's own words should alert him to his father's potentially devilish allegiance long before his arrival. As he alights on the idea of

asking his father to fix the floor, he refers to him as '[m]y own flesh and blood, old Nick Fante'.<sup>71</sup> The play on 'old Nick' also gestured to in the naming of Nick/Vico in "The Orgy" and Nick Molise of *The Brotherhood of the Grape* is here made explicit. Fante's own father was himself called Nick, but whereas he often invented names for characters based on real people, that he so frequently retained his father's actual forename for such strongly Devil-associated characters Nick Fante had inspired is suggestive, I would argue, that the persistent invocation of 'Old Nick' as a Satanic alias is quite intentional.<sup>72</sup> "'How blind we are! How stupid!'"<sup>73</sup> exclaims John Fante (the character), ostensibly at his prior failure to think of calling on his father's building skills. With hindsight, however, the line is revealed as a metatextual joke made by John Fante (the writer) at his surrogate's expense: How blind indeed, and how stupid, to miss the onomastic warning about 'Old Nick', even as it is placed in his own mouth by his own pen.

By persistently identifying even his father figures (even the more benign ones) as both Devils and bringers of material turmoil, Fante suggests that the twin fears that grip the other members of these families – the immediate/earthly and the eternal/spiritual – are in fact one and the same, inextricable from each other because they emerge from the same source, and inescapably preoccupying because that common source is the family's father. To illustrate this more precisely, consider once more "The Road to Hell". Therein the child narrator believes that the Kid's father's inability to buy the glove catalyses the theft, but if poverty is defined by the father's economic status, and the father is (as I earlier argued is the case in this story as in others) identified with the Devil, then the failure to provide *is itself* Satan's temptation. Thus a day-to-day worldly anxiety about lack of material goods may be every bit as philosophically terrifying and existentially critical as a fear of eternal damnation precisely because both are embodied within each other *and* within the discomfitingly domestic and inescapable presence of the father.

Conversely and equally, this is why the terror of damnation that stalks the minds of Fante's adolescent boy protagonists and their despairing mothers is every bit as physically real, tangible and immediate as its seemingly more quotidian twin (the fear of poverty). The fear of damnation seems as concrete and proximate as the fear of not knowing where a next meal will come from precisely because it *is*, in the most literal sense, equally proximate: it lives within the family home, in the form of the father-revealed-as-Devil.

I mentioned earlier the importance of a particular brand of literalism in the faith of Fante's matriarchs, a faith that is built absolutely on the certainty that God and the Devil are personal, physical beings and Heaven and Hell spatially-realizable, navigable geographies. Metaphorical or figurative interpretation of one's religion is rejected in favour of an ironclad suspension of disbelief in the literal. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated in an episode Stephen Cooper relays regarding Fante himself. Cooper notes that Fante, even after years of drifting from Catholicism in his adulthood, 'through forty-six years of marriage would insist to his wife that as a boy of nine one night at the foot of his bed he had witnessed an apparition of the Virgin Mary'.<sup>74</sup>

Only with an understanding of this avowedly literalist religiosity, rooted in saint cults and *Festas* that further complicated the anxieties of worldly poverty by linking directly the ability to "pay" a saint with forgiveness for one's sins, that an association between dissolute fathers and the Devil acquires the genuine and immediate terror of 'The Orgy' or the opening description of Svevo in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*. For the characters who come to a creeping realisation of their fathers' sense of the Satanic, this is no mere metaphor, a set of images invoked as a writerly conceit to illustrate the moral failings of these patriarchs. Rather, it is the sincere and authentic fear that if one's father, the image in which one is made, is not God but the Devil, then one's own odds of outrunning temptation and damnation are vanishingly slim, which perhaps goes some way to explaining why those odds are of such

urgent concern to almost all of Fante's adolescent protagonists (and their mothers). They apprehend that Satan cannot be evaded spatially if you live under his roof, and he cannot be evaded spiritually if he is indeed your 'own flesh and blood, Old Nick'.

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Julian Tamburri, *A Semiotic of Ethnicity: In (Re)cognition of the Italian/ American Writer* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> John Fante, *The Wine of Youth* (New York, NY: Ecco, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> See Salvatore Primeggia, 'La Via Vecchia and Italian Folk Religiosity: The Peasants and Immigrants Speak', in *Models and Images of Catholicism in Italian Americana: Academy and Society*, ed. by Joseph A. Varacalli and others (Stony Brook, NY: Forum Italicum, 2004), pp. 15-39 (p. 16). Primeggia writes on the prevalence among Italian-Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of an approach to religion exported from the peasant communities they had left behind, one in which 'the Catholic Church was seen less as a system of [...] values and more as [...] protection against severe everyday realities in a world plagued by evil spirits and demons. It is precisely this sense of urgent practical protection against foes whose danger is as present

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and phenomenal as it is spiritual and noumenal that inheres in the religious attitudes of Fante's anxiously devout characters.

<sup>4</sup> Fred L. Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets: The Evolution of American Narrative* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); Catherine J. Kordich, *John Fante: His Novels and Novellas* (New York, NY: Twayne, 2000); Rocco Marinaccio, "'Tea and Cookies. Diavolo!': Italian American Masculinity in John Fante's *'Wait until Spring, Bandini'*", *MELUS*, 34.3 (2009), 43-69; Stephen Cooper, *Full of Life: A Biography of John Fante* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> John Fante, 'The Orgy', in *West of Rome* (New York, NY: Ecco, 2002), pp. 147-188. Although set in 1925, the composition date of 'The Orgy' is uncertain. Unlike many of Fante's other posthumously-collected stories, 'The Orgy' had not previously been published in a magazine; the source for the published text is Fante's original manuscript (now held as part of the Fante papers collection at UCLA) which is, frustratingly, undated.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

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<sup>10</sup> John Fante, 'Charge It', in *The Big Hunger: Stories 1932-1959*, ed. by Stephen Cooper (New York, NY: Ecco, 2002), pp. 41-51. A very similar episode also appears in Fante's 1938 novel *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*. (*Wait Until Spring, Bandini* has latterly been anthologised along with the other three *Bandini* novels in a single volume (John Fante, *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, in *The Bandini Quartet* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2004)); all references in this paper to *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* are to this edition of *The Bandini Quartet*.)

<sup>11</sup> John Fante, 'A Wife for Dino Rossi', in *The Wine of Youth*, pp. 71-110 (p. 76).

<sup>12</sup> Fante, *1933 Was a Bad Year* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001), pp. 8-9.

<sup>13</sup> John Fante, 'Altar Boy', in *The Wine of Youth*, pp. 39-54 (p. 54).

<sup>14</sup> John Fante, 'Bricklayer in the Snow', in *The Wine of Youth*, pp. 21-30 (p. 21). Prior to its inclusion in *Dago Red* and *The Wine of Youth*, this story originally appeared in *The American Mercury* 37 (January 1936).

<sup>15</sup> Fante, *1933*, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> William Foote Whyte, *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 269. Note that whilst Whyte's research was

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conducted around 1937, it focused on young men of precisely the same generation as John Fante and his Colorado boy-protagonists. Moreover, whilst Whyte insists upon the culture of the *Festa* and saint donations as retaining continuing importance in Italian immigrant communities the late thirties, by his own admission these were ideas of greater importance to the generation prior to that of his interviewees, i.e. the generation of Mama and Papa in 'The Orgy', and Fante's other parent characters.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 270-271.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 271.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>20</sup> Whyte, p. 269; Primeggia, p. 29.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>22</sup> Punningly, the only time a word in the story that sounds reverent – 'like a holy word' – coming from Papa's mouth, it is 'gold' rather than 'God' (Ibid., p. 164). Again his status as figure aligned with a deity of sin (in this instance greed) rather than that of Christianity is made apparent

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.169.

<sup>24</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. by Bernard Williams, trans. by Josephine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 155.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 109, p. 120, p. 199.

<sup>26</sup> Cooper, *Full of Life: A Biography*. 74.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>28</sup> Fante, 'The Orgy', p. 177.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 177

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 177

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 147

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 177

<sup>33</sup> Although avoided by mainstream contemporary Biblical scholars, such imagery regarding Hell's physical location is employed throughout older translations of the Bible, including the Douay-Rheims version (the Challoner revision of which was completed in 1752 but which is likely still to have been the text studied by a young Catholic boy in the United States in the 1920s). See for example 'thou shalt be brought down to Hell, into the depth of the pit' (Isaiah 14.15), 'the lower Hell' (Psalms 85.13), or 'deeper than Hell' (Job 11.8).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 154.

<sup>35</sup> Fante, 'The Orgy', p. 186.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>41</sup> John Fante, 'The Road to Hell', in *The Wine of Youth*, pp. 111-117 (p. 114). Prior to its inclusion in *Dago Red* and *The Wine of Youth*, this story originally appeared in *The American Mercury* 42 (October 1937), the eighth and last Fante story to be published by the magazine.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 111-12.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>49</sup> Fante, *Bandini Quartet*, p. 84.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 86-87.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., pp. 40-41.

<sup>54</sup> William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) <<http://www.bartleby.com/235/253.html>> [accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2016] (para. 33 of 160).

<sup>55</sup> Fante, *Bandini Quartet*, p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 8-9.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>60</sup> Primeggia, p. 26.

<sup>61</sup> Matthew 6. 22.

<sup>62</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1674)

<<http://www.paradiselost.org/8-Search-All.html>> [accessed 12th June 2016] (II. 747-814).

<sup>63</sup> Fante, *Bandini Quartet*, p. 7.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-7.

<sup>65</sup> John Fante, *The Brotherhood of the Grape* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005).

<sup>66</sup> John Fante, *1933*, p. 17.

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<sup>67</sup> John Fante, 'A Bad Woman', in *The Big Hunger*, pp. 65-83.

<sup>68</sup> Fante, 'Bricklayer in the Snow', pp. 21-30.

<sup>69</sup> William Shakespeare, *Henry IV Part 1*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2006), II. 4. 447.

<sup>70</sup> Philip Roth, *Sabbath's Theater* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995).

<sup>71</sup> John Fante, *Full of Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2010), Chapter 1, Location 352. Kindle eBook edition.

<sup>72</sup> When Fante realised in 1935 that with age he was starting to look more like his father, he wrote that he was not 'such a bad looking devil after all' (see John Fante, *Selected Letters 1932-1981*, ed. by Seamus Cooney (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1991), p. 93). The choice of idiom here provides a further suggestion that Fante Jr. was certainly alive to the possibilities of the connection between fathers and devils conjured by the coincidence of his own Old Nick's name.

<sup>73</sup> Fante, *Full of Life*, Chapter 1, Location 352.

<sup>74</sup> Cooper, *Full of Life: A Biography*, p. 31.