

“beyond ethnicity”:

**portraits of the
italian-american artist in
garibaldi lapolla’s novels**

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To the student of art history, the word “Italy” brings to mind Giotto, DaVinci, Michelangelo. But the majority of Italian immigrants who passed through the gates of Ellis Island during the New Immigrant Era (1880-1920, roughly speaking) were no more familiar with the works of those great artists than with those, say, of Rubens, Goya, or Lorraine. In contrast to the well-educated and cultivated Northern Italians who dominated Italian immigration to America in the mid-nineteenth century, the “new” Italians were predominantly from the economically and culturally impoverished provinces of Southern Italy, the Mezzogiorno.¹ Here, where illiteracy rates in some areas exceeded 90 percent, Northern Italy and its cultural heritage were viewed with disdain. In America, the children of these transplanted Mezzogiornians dropped out of school at notoriously high rates, and they typically had no more respect for such “frivolous” subjects as art and literature than did their parents. It should not be surprising, then, that the small group of Italian-American novelists who emerged on the literary scene in the 1930s (when the doors opened for “ghetto writers”) would focus on the hardships of working-class life and would display little or no interest in the fine arts. There are no portraits of the Italian-American artist in Pietro DiDonato’s *Christ in Concrete* (1937) nor in John Fante’s *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938), perhaps the two best known (which is not to say widely

read) Italian-American novels of the Depression decade; nor in the novels of their contemporaries Guido D'Agostino, John Moroso, or Jo Pagano.

But earlier in the decade an Americanized son of the Mezzogiorno did indeed create such portraits. His name, virtually unknown today, was Garibaldi Lapolla, and his fiction reveals a deep and passionate interest in the arts, in painting and sculpture particularly.

Like the author of *The Marble Faun*, Lapolla uses his knowledge of the arts to deepen and enrich his novels, his fictional artists, like Nathaniel Hawthorne's, representing distinct aesthetic views. Unlike Hawthorne, however, Lapolla had to confront the question hyphenate writers cannot escape: namely, should their art seek to express or transcend their ethnic experience? Too often, as Werner Sollors contends in *Beyond Ethnicity*,² scholars and critics take an exclusively ethnic perspective in analyzing the works of hyphenate writers, forgetting—or simply not recognizing—that most American ethnic literature is in fact a syncretism of the traditional and the modern. As was immigrant culture itself. In general, immigrants did not simply accept or reject either the traditional or the new culture, but rather sought adjustments between the two. As John Bodnar has shown, the “culture of everyday life” (kinship networks, folklife, religion, etc.) formed by the transplanted was an “amalgam of past and present, acceptance and resistance.”³ Lapolla's novels, their portraits of the Italian-American artist in particular, vividly dramatize Sollors's and Bodnar's central theses.

Before pursuing this point, however, I must introduce Lapolla, since few readers of this article will be familiar with his life and works.⁴ Lapolla emigrated with his parents from Southern Italy to New York's lower East Harlem in 1890, when he was two years old. One of the fortunate few Italian immigrants of his day to use the school as a vehicle of escape from the slums, he earned his A.B. (1910) and A.M. (1912) degrees from Columbia Teachers College, writing his master's thesis on the political thought of the English romantic poet Percy Shelley. After returning from duty in World War I, he served the New York City school system as an English teacher, head of an English department, and, during the last twenty years of his life, high-school principal. Given his educational background and teaching experience, it is not surprising that Lapolla's novels manifest a sensibility far more refined than those of his contemporary Italian-American writers; indeed, his fiction is arguably the most sophisticated and polished of any Italian-American novelist prior to Helen Barolini.

His first novel, *The Fire in the Flesh*, was published in 1931; *Miss Rollins in Love* followed in 1932; and *The Grand Gennaro*, his final and perhaps best work, appeared in 1935, nearly two decades before his death. (He also authored or edited several high school English texts, including an anthology of world poetry co-edited by Mark Van Doren.)⁵ *Fire in the Flesh* and *Gennaro* are powerful accounts of Italian immigrants' efforts to attain the American Dream—to “make America”—during the New Immigrant Era, and each was well received by critics. Frederick Marsh, for example, described *Gennaro* as an “absorbing and colorful novel” that “illuminates a fragment from that great amorphous race and nation—the American people.”⁶ A reviewer of *Fire in the Flesh* found that book to be a vivid portrait of turn-of-the-century Little Italy, composed by a

“gifted writer.”⁷ *Miss Rollins* (which was not reviewed by major newspapers) is an interesting and insightful psychological drama of a sexually repressed teacher’s affair with an Italian-American immigrant student; but the book’s sentimental ending prevents it from reaching the high level of achievement attained by its sister novels, which develop and sustain an essentially tragic vision of life.

The reviewers are correct in praising Lapolla’s portraits of yesterday’s Little Italy, but his fiction is something more than mere urban “local color.” In addition to dramatizing the complexities of Italian-immigrant culture, his novels artfully analyze the inevitable—and sometimes catastrophic—stresses and conflicts that beset immigrants under the pressure of assimilation. To use Sollors’s terms, Lapolla’s novels center on the tensions between “descent” (identity based on heredity or blood ties) and “consent” (self-created “American” identity). The immigrant protagonists of each novel ultimately “consent,” or assimilate; but, like the focal character of Mario Puzo’s *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, they must pay a heavy emotional price for doing so.⁸

The consent-descent theme receives its most compelling treatment in *Gennaro*, a novel which looks forward to the *Fortunate Pilgrim* and backward to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. A lowly *cafone* from a Southern Italian town where there was no school and where it was not unusual for peasants to share their quarters with pigs and sheep, Gennaro Accuci emigrates to Italian East Harlem determined to “make America.” And he does so, as ruthlessly as any robber baron. His rag-and-scrap-metal business (which he virtually stole from the original owner, who had been a boyhood friend in Italy) earns him wealth and, more important to this illiterate immigrant, respect: many of his fellow immigrants who would not have deigned to speak to him in the old country now seek him out for favors. Thus from a purely socioeconomic point of view, Gennaro is indeed a fortunate pilgrim; but not from the moral or spiritual one. Like *Gatsby* and the protagonists of a host of American novels critical of the American Dream, Gennaro’s service to the “vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty” of materialism⁹ leaves him spiritually empty. Once he has made his “pile,” he becomes obsessed with constructing a cathedral in Little Italy—an icon of the moral beauty that his life has lacked.

Proud as he is of the new self he has created in America (like *Gatsby*, Gennaro has in a sense sprung from his conception of himself), he yet clings fiercely to his Italian identity through most of the narrative. Gennaro’s Old World self is objectified by his golden earrings, which his father attached to Gennaro’s ears when he was a boy: “I’ll keep them,” he defiantly asserts, “unless the President in Washington sends me a telegram” (5). The President doesn’t, but Gennaro loses the emblems of “descent” nonetheless. They are violently torn from him by a fellow Italian immigrant who goes mad in the new culture, the physical suffering and scars that Gennaro experiences representing the emotional price of assimilation. The earrings do not, however, disappear after they are ripped from Gennaro, for they pass into the hands of his son Emilio, who, though thoroughly Americanized, will cherish these tokens of his ancestral heritage as he does the Italian poetry and opera he so loves.

Emilio's interest in and knowledge of Italian art and literature, it is important to note, are by-products not of his Italian background (he spent his boyhood in the school-less town from which his father fled) but of his formal education in American schools—not, that is, of “descent” but of “consent.” Since Gennaro is illiterate and uneducated, he cannot understand and appreciate the operas and plays he attends with his family; their discussions of the performances they attend baffle and annoy him, and the cultural gap between father and children widens. Thus development of an aesthetic sense is one measure or index of assimilation in *Gennaro*, and in Lapolla's other two novels as well. In *Fire in the Flesh* and *Miss Rollins*, counterparts of Emilio devote their lives to art; in doing so, Lapolla emphasizes, they must acculturate. But acculturation does not necessarily mean rejecting one's Old World culture: the Italian-immigrant artists of these two novels, one might say, take off—but do not discard—their ancestral “earrings.”

Fire in the Flesh contains, as far as I know, the first fictional portrait of an Italian-immigrant artist. This story, which has striking parallels with Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, revolves around the illicit affair between a proud and beautiful Italian peasant girl named Agnese and a scholarly, sensitive village priest, Gelsomino. If Gennaro is Lapolla's Gatsby, Agnese is his Hester Prynne and Gelsomino his Dimmesdale; like Hawthorne's minister, the Italian padre not only fathers a child but conceals the fact and allows his lover to suffer the entire burden of public humiliation. Ostracized by her provincial townspeople, the hot-tempered and iron-willed Agnese (who in Hester's place, one suspects, would have spat on the scarlet A and ground it under her heel) defiantly marries a former suitor whom she does not love—whom she repeatedly calls a “pol-troon”—and sails with him and her illegitimate son Giovanni to the United States. Though she “makes America,” she learns (as does Gennaro) the moral of Hawthorne's tale: that a wrong can never be fully expiated in this life.

Inheriting Gelsomino's fine intellect and sensibilities, Giovanni is a dreamy, bookish youth who does not allow the squalor of the East Harlem slums to deter him from his search for that intangible “something with a rose in it” (34) and from his desire to become an artist. Only when absorbed in his pencil-sketching does Giovanni find relief from the harsh realities of tenement life and from the anguish his mother's lack of affection causes him. In a remark that suggests Lapolla's affinity for impressionistic painting, we are told that young Giovanni's drawings manifest a “juvenile inaccuracy of outline and a juvenile accuracy of essential mood and character” (30). Unfortunately for the boy, his teachers, their taste in art governed by the “rigid conventions of the day” (30), fail to perceive and therefore to encourage his artistic abilities. The disdain Lapolla reveals here for the academic classicism that dominated art instruction during the early decades of the century receives more explicit expression in *Miss Rollins*, as we shall see.

The example and encouragement Giovanni fails to find in school are provided by one Gino Birrichino, a lusty Italian immigrant whom the boy happens upon one day as the artist is busy painting a storm scene *alfresco*. Splashing his paints onto the canvas with verve, Gino instills his tempest with such force of motion and violence that Giovanni is awe-struck. Under Gino's supervision,

Giovanni—who has little patience with the formal techniques of painting that Gino tries to teach him—improves his ability to capture essential mood and character, but he does not produce truly inspired art until Gelsomino, who after nine years has come to the New World in search of Agnese and the son he denied, appears on the scene. Now Giovanni, who suspects that the former priest is his natural father, pours into his drawings and paintings the tumultuous emotions the presence of Gelsomino arouses in him; when Gelsomino is at his side, “love gets into [Giovanni’s] brush, his paints, his themes” (331).

But if Giovanni’s devotion to art brings him closer to his father, whose refined character reflects Northern Italian culture, it leads him into sharp conflict with his mother and the Mezzogiorno values she embodies. In contrast to Gelsomino, the illiterate Agnese cannot comprehend, and therefore reacts with disdain toward, her son’s desire to become an artist. Like Gennaro, Agnese “had too little perspective or understanding of the manifold values built up by a cultured society to be able to grasp completely or sympathetically” the yearning to draw or paint (111); she has never experienced the “consciousness of beauty caught out of the heavens and made permanent in a color, a line, a word” (108). Agnese, moreover, associates art with Northern Italy, oppressor of the Southern Italians. She demands that her son abandon his “frivolous” hobby and set about making money. Torn between his love for his art and need of his mother’s love, Giovanni suffers; and the more he suffers, the more compelled he is to express his turbulent feelings on canvas. Not until he runs away from home—the only way he can escape his Mezzogiorno or “descent” identity—and is nearly killed in the dark heart of the slums (the price for “consent” can be high) does Agnese allow the boy to pursue his dreams and become, as Gelsomino hopes, the “new Murillo” (227).

Gelsomino’s allusion is to the versatile seventeenth-century Spanish Baroque painter, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617-82), whose religious portraits and low-life genre scenes are characterized by their fusion of exalted vision and sensuous details, and by their gentle and compassionate tone.¹⁰ Generally considered during his own times and during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as one of the world’s great masters, superior even to Rubens, Murillo was not so highly regarded by art critics of Lapolla’s generation. The influential art historian Thomas Craven, for example, makes a disparaging reference to the Spaniard in *Men of Art* (1931); and in *Art as Experience*, John Dewey (who was teaching at Columbia when Lapolla was enrolled there, and whose influence on Lapolla’s educational views is apparent throughout *Miss Rollins*) cites Murillo as an example of the talented artist who subordinates artistic judgment to “sentimental religiosity.”¹¹ Clearly Lapolla, whose novels, though not religiously didactic, are pervaded by Christian images and icons, had a greater appreciation of and respect for religious art than did Murillo’s critics. Indeed, when Gelsomino remarks that a painter is “like God” (110), we know that the priest’s sacred view of art is the author’s.

Near the end of the novel, Gelsomino, referring to his earlier comparison between the painter and God, tells Giovanni: “I can add no more to those words. To explain them will be the work ahead of you” (327). What the former priest does not explain here is what M. H. Abrams would call “natural

supernaturalism”—the secularization of Christian theological ideas and symbols that began during the Renaissance and culminated in the Romantic Age. Whatever their creed or lack of one, Abrams observes, romantic writers and artists sought to “save traditional concepts, schemes, and values which had been based on the relation of the Creator to his creatures and creation.”¹² To romantic poets like Wordsworth and Shelley (Lapolla, we recall, wrote his master’s thesis on the latter), the artist, in other words, was “like God.”

Whether Giovanni will fulfill his father’s expectations and become the “new Murillo” of the urban ghetto, we cannot know, for this novel, like Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist*, concludes with the young priest of the imagination at the incipient stage of his artistic development. In *Miss Rollins*, however, Lapolla provides a fully developed portrait, its immigrant protagonist developing, one might say, into a “new Michelangelo.”

Here, as in *Fire in the Flesh*, Lapolla suggests that enduring art can spring only from a deeply spiritual consciousness born of profound suffering and love, and that the East Harlem ghetto is an ideal furnace for the forging of such a spirit. Like Giovanni, Donato Contini, the Italian-immigrant student whose affair with his thirty-year-old teacher of classics forms the core of the story, finds in art sweet relief from the squalor of the slums and a distressing family situation. Donato’s father, Emanuele, brings his wife and two sons from Messina to New York in search of the American Dream, but that dream quickly goes sour. Donato’s elder brother joins a gang and is eventually executed for being an accomplice to a robbery-murder; Signora Contini then dies of a broken heart; and when Donato’s grief-stricken and destitute father dies, the boy becomes a penniless orphan.

But if he dies in utter poverty, Don Emanuele nonetheless leaves Donato a rich legacy—the passion for and skill at carving puppet heads. In the Old World, Signor Contini was a master puppeteer. Though seldom the subject of academic discourses on literature and the arts, puppetry is as alive today as it was in ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome and China. The marionette theatre, which has intrigued such writers as Goethe, Anatole France, George Bernard Shaw, and, most recently, Mario Puzo,¹³ was first introduced into this country by Antonio Parisi, a native of the Continis’ home province, Messina. Often called the “dean of puppeteers,”¹⁴ Parisi established the first marionette theatre in Boston in 1888, moving it to New York’s East Harlem in 1896, where young Garibaldi Lapolla might have attended its performances. Dramatizing the chivalric tales of Ariosto’s Renaissance epic, the *Orlando Furioso* (the Italian rendition of the *Song of Roland*), the puppet plays staged by Parisi and other immigrant puppeteers were sophisticated artistic productions that sometimes included a cast of several hundred hand-crafted and elaborately costumed marionettes; when performed from beginning to end, Ariosto’s epic required more than three years of daily performances.¹⁵ These puppet plays, vocalized in Italian, were as important to the newcomers as was Broadway theatre to “American” New Yorkers.

The popularity of the marionette extended beyond the boundaries of the ghetto in the 1920s when the schools, recognizing the educational value of puppet plays, began creating the forerunners of today’s Muppets and *Sesame*

Street. So popular did marionette art become during this decade that *Theatre Arts Monthly* in 1928 devoted a special issue to puppetry, noting in it that the winter of that year saw publication of seven books on the subject and that no less than fifteen professional companies were then staging plays around the country.¹⁶ The most famous marionette theatre of the day was Agrippino Monteo's, which he and his family opened on Mulberry Street in East Harlem in 1921 (See Cover and Figure One).

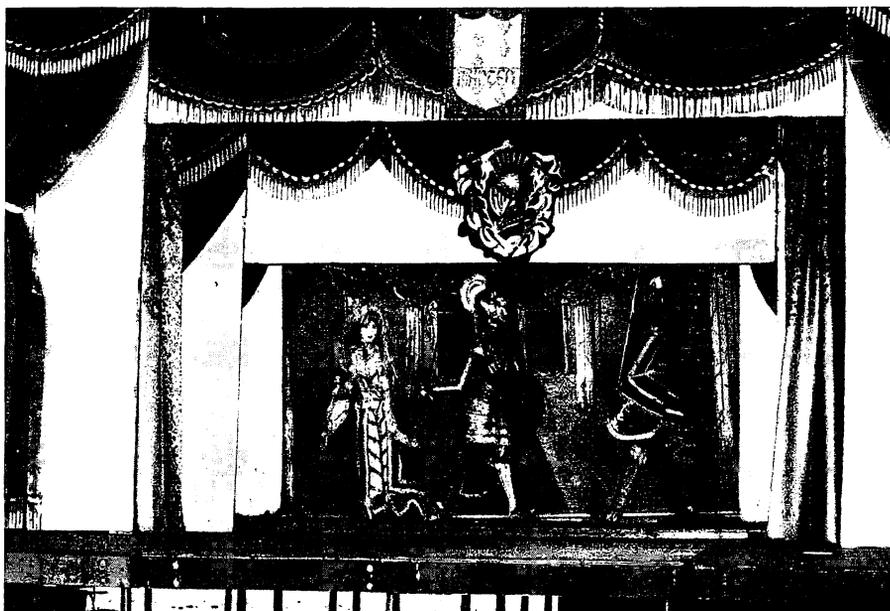


FIGURE ONE: Audience Perspective of Italian puppets doing combat in a scene from the *Orlando Furioso*.

The puppet theatre revival, however, was short-lived. The restrictive immigration legislation of the early 1920s drastically stemmed the flow of Italian immigrants to New York's shores; and as Italo-Americans who had arrived prior to 1920 became acculturated, their interest in Italian language and culture waned, while their appetite for that very new and very American art form, the motion picture, increased. As Robert Sklar emphasizes in his cultural history of the celluloid medium, the American movie first took root and flourished in the immigrant ghettos, the nickelodeons and peep shows of the early decades of the century satisfying the urban lower-class ethnic's desire for inexpensive entertainment. (In 1908, over six hundred nickel theatres were operating in New York City alone, with daily attendance averaging between three and four hundred thousand admissions.)¹⁷ The marionette theatre was just one among many traditional cultural forms whose existence was imperiled by "nickel madness," and by the time Lapolla wrote *Miss Rollins*, the Italian puppet play was all but dead, Manteo's theatre the only one to survive into the early 1930s.¹⁸

Apparently Don Emanuele, whose decision to leave his homeland was prompted by the news that puppet theatres were thriving in the United States,

arrived in New York with his trunkloads of puppets—a complete assemblage of all the social classes and all the legendary figures of Italian literature and folk life—after the revival had peaked, for his Grande Teatro Unico Marionettista dell’America is a grand failure. In Messina the Contini puppet plays, which the entire family helped stage, were admired for an animation that was the breath of life itself (194) and for their ability to conjure up the romantic world of Medieval chivalry. In the United States, by contrast, the Signor’s virtuoso performances, though they are able to work their magic on some, especially children, are considered merely quaint by most young Italians, too Old World to rival the new homeland’s peep shows and motion pictures. Some disrespectful members of the sparse audiences attracted to the Continis’ storefront theatre even laugh at and deride the master puppeteer who in Italy had enjoyed the respect and admiration of dukes and nobles. So Don Emanuele closes his theatre, cursing his decision to emigrate to America. One day Donato discovers his father’s emaciated body lying lifeless among his dusty marionettes.

From one perspective, Signor Contini is a victim of modernism; but it is equally valid to see him as a victim of too rigid an adherence to the traditional (in this respect, he has something in common with Franz Kafka’s “hunger artist”). To survive transplantation to the soil of urban industrialism, ethnic folk artists had to blend the old with the new, and often did so successfully. The amateur theatres, for example, that thrived in the immigrant ghettos owed their popularity to the fact that they dramatized the newcomers’ American rather than European experiences; immigrant Hungarians modified traditional songs to give expression to the boardinghouse experience; Texas Czechs amalgamated jazz and the “big band” sound into their ethnic music to attract audiences in the 1930s, and so forth.¹⁹ Folk artists who tried, as Signor Contini does, to maintain the Old World purity of their art invited failure.

If devotion to ancestral heritage indirectly causes Signor Contini to wither and perish, a willingness to assimilate allows his son not only to survive, but to become a renowned and wealthy sculptor. Significantly, the boy’s success owes as much to his relationships with three non-Italian women as to his sculpting skills.

The first and most important female influence on Donato is the book’s title character, Amy Rollins. The intelligent but emotionally fragile Latin teacher, who becomes her pupil’s mother figure and, for a time, lover after the boy’s parents die, rescues the aspiring artist from reform school and at great sacrifice to herself provides the material resources he needs to practice his craft. Amy also instills in her pupil-paramour a love of classical poetry that refines his sensibilities and that leaves its mark on his mature art. Lapolla’s emphasis on Donato’s literary instruction is significant, for one must keep in mind that if he had remained in the Mezzogiorno, the boy might have remained illiterate, and almost certainly would not have become steeped in classical literature. To meet the great poets of his ancestral land, Donato (like *Gennaro’s* Emilio) had to come to America.

Donato’s second benefactress is a sophisticated and wealthy Jewish divorcee, Selma Kreyndorf, who ushers the struggling ghetto artist into New York’s influential art circles, creating the opportunities he needs to display his work and

meet the “right” people. Here again Lapolla implicitly contrasts the old and new cultures, to the favor of the latter, for the Italian caste system would have precluded *contadini* from such social mingling with the upper classes.

The third woman in Donato’s life is Angel Smith, the “solidly American” (217) and very chic daughter of a Kansas millionaire. Falling in love with her, Donato leaves Amy (who, unknown to him, is carrying his child) and weds the Anglo millionairess.

On the symbolic level the union of the son of *contadini* and the daughter of a “one-hundred-percent American” family (an act of “consent” on the part of the immigrant Italian) represents cultural fusion, or ethnogenesis. By marrying Angel (and Donato, I should emphasize, marries for love, not money), the boy escapes the “hopeless unrelieved limitations” (193) of slum life. Lapolla does not idealize the image of the poverty-stricken artist: indeed, he stresses that without Amy’s financial assistance, Donato would not be able to purchase the expensive materials he needs to practice his craft. Ghetto immigrants who would devote their lives to the creation of beauty and truth must first, the implication is, gain economic security and enter the mainstream of American life. The absence of an Old World caste system makes marriage one means of doing so in America.

If struggling immigrant artists cannot wed wealth, they can always prostitute their talents to Business, as does Pierre Orgulowich, Donato’s foil in the novel. A talented modernist sculptor who is unable to make a living selling his works, Orgulowich gains the economic security he desires by applying his creative powers and technical skills to designing arty window dressings for a fashionable Fifth Avenue clothing store. When Donato, desperately in need of a job, becomes Orgulowich’s assistant, tension develops between the boy who burns with the desire to create transcendent art and the man who declares that “There is not the room for pure art. . . . There is not room for the art that will not fit into the general order. We want the art that tells the story of business” (311). Put in Shavian terms, the Gospel of Art collides with the Gospel of Getting On.

The idea that art must adapt itself to the general order was a primary tenet of the Constructivist school of sculpture that arose in Russia shortly before World War I.²⁰ The Constructivists, who admitted no distinction between fine and applied arts, insisted that all art should serve the masses and should be fashioned out of “workers” materials—iron, brass, plaster, and the like. In parallel with the movement toward abstraction in painting (Constructivism had its roots in Cubism), the Constructivists produced sculptures that were non-representational, non-illusory, non-symbolic, non-human. When the Bolsheviks began closing down art studios around 1920, the leading Constructivists either fled Russia to Western Europe, to France in particular, or put their skills to work for the Soviet state. The Constructivist aesthetic had an especially powerful influence on Josef Albers and the Weimar Bauhaus. The Bauhaus movement, in turn, diffused into and eventually came to dominate all levels of visual culture in the United States²¹—a lamentable chapter in American art history, in the irreverent eyes of Tom Wolfe, whose *From Bauhaus to Our House* shows

how the Bauhaus movement sacrificed visual beauty and, in architecture, human comfort on the altar of theory.²²

From his non-objective window designs fashioned out of industrial materials, down to his Russian-French heritage, Orgulowich represents the Constructivist, particularly those “minions of utility” (*Miss Rollins* 312) who helped create the “debased currency of modernism”²³ that dominated the decorative arts during the 1920s and 1930s. As for the cubist figures that earned Orgulowich some stature in the art world before he became a “crochery stylist” and lost his “soul state,” they are, to Donato, lifeless and uninteresting.

Donato’s rejection of Orgulowich and the aesthetic he objectifies reflects Depression-era America’s intolerance of the European-imported modernism that dominated American visual art after the revolutionary Armory Show of 1913. As the bread lines lengthened, abstract, anti-humanist art became objectionable to increasing numbers of American artists and art critics, even to those who, like Thomas Craven, had earlier expressed enthusiasm for it. “If art,” Craven was contending in 1931, “is to be stripped of all human and social value; if it is to be reduced to congestions of cubes and cones the sole meaning of which lies in mechanical ingenuity; if it has no higher function than is claimed for it by certain Modernist sects; then it is not worthy of consideration.”²⁴ That passage nicely capsules the perspective on modernism presented in *Miss Rollins*.

But if Donato would agree with Craven’s assessment of abstract art, he nonetheless shares the modernists’ contempt for the fossilized classicism that was the signature of American sculpture during the first two decades of the century. In the university art classes—which Lapolla at one point calls the “graveyard of genius and the arena of the mediocre” (152)—and in such prestigious art institutions as the National Academy of Design, the academicians fostered painting and sculpture that were technically proficient but hardly creative or expressive. Donato’s aesthetic sense is offended by the “childish imitations” of Greek sculpture that repose in the museums and public parks (where, it has been said, such statues have served most valuably as resting places for pigeons).²⁵

Though diametric in nearly every respect, the academic traditionalists and the modernists shared the conviction that the emotions and values of the artist should not manifest themselves in the art work. Like the non-representational designs of the Constructivists, whose motto was “Construction, not expression,” the photorealistic and derivative portraits modeled by the academicians were essentially impersonal and dispassionate. No wonder, then, that the “sensitive, passionate” Donato (204), who strives to create marble figures that seem to “talk,” even to “spit at you,”²⁶ should revolt against both schools and seek to emulate those sculptors, ancient and modern, whose works exemplify the romantic spirit. He names three.

The sculptor he most admires is Rodin, whose work, Donato says, is the only art worth viewing in the Metropolitan Museum. (The Museum acquired its first Rodin pieces in 1912.) The Frenchman, of course, revolutionized sculpture in much the same way the Impressionists Manet and Monet did painting. Departing from the rigid classicism of the academies, he focused his art on the imagination and on his own deep-seated emotions, and in doing so helped rescue

early twentieth-century American sculpture from the sterile verisimilitude and prettiness that so repulses Donato. The true artist, Rodin insists, is concerned not with achieving a surface likeness of his subject but with seizing its “character,” which he defines as “the soul, the feelings, the ideas expressed by the features of a face, the gestures and actions of a human being, the colors of a sky, the line of a horizon.”²⁷ (Interestingly, Rodin’s preoccupation with thought and emotion rather than with the material itself was denigrated by many modernist sculptors, who found Rodin’s art too “literary,”²⁸ a clue perhaps as to why a novelist would find the Frenchman’s work so appealing, as Lapolla apparently did.)

The second great sculptor from whom Donato draws his example is, not surprisingly, that tempestuous Italian whom Rodin so admired²⁹ and with whose work Rodin’s has such obvious affinity—Michelangelo. What attracts Donato to these two masters is, as he puts it, their genius at expressing “bizarre states of the soul” in “regulation anatomy” (327).

Heralded as the “Michaelangelo of today” by some art critics in the 1930s,³⁰ the final member of the trio lauded by Donato also had a genius for creating realistic forms that project passionate soul states. His name is Jacob Epstein (1880-1959); he was a Jewish-American; and his art career and aesthetic views so parallel Donato’s as to suggest that Lapolla had him in mind when he created his fictional sculptor.³¹

Son of immigrants who fled from the pogroms of Eastern Europe to the crowded tenements of New York’s Hester Street, Epstein first gained artistic prominence with the sketches of Jewish slum life he contributed to Hutchin Hapgood’s *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902). Hapgood assessed these drawings as follows: “[Epstein] tells the truth about the ghetto as he sees it, but into the dark reality of the external life he puts frequently a melancholy beauty of spirit. . . . While really remaining faithful to the external type, his love for the race leads him to emphasize the spiritual and human experiences of the faces about him.”³² A “new Murillo,” Hapgood might have called him.

But Epstein did not remain a “ghetto artist.” His earnings from his drawings and financial support from Mrs. Hamilton Fish allowed him to travel to Paris and study sculpture at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. In 1906 he married a Scotswoman and settled in England; with the exception of a visit to New York in 1927, he remained in England for the rest of his life, earning the title “Sir.”

Like Donato, Epstein was a master of sculptural portraiture. Queen Alexandra purchased his *Head of an Infant* in 1907, and he created busts of many of the most famous personages of his age: Winston Churchill, Albert Einstein and Joseph Conrad, to name three. But he was equally adept at carving massive art works such as his *Tomb for Oscar Wilde*, the Hudson Memorial in Hyde Park, and the numerous Biblical figures and scenes in the tradition of Michelangelo.

If Lapolla had not become aware of Epstein prior to 1927, he undoubtedly did during the former East Sider’s much-publicized four months in New York.³³ During his visit, Epstein exhibited his works; gained headlines with his testimony in a court case called to determine whether an abstract sculptural work qualified as art; and formed a friendship with John Dewey. A group of

Dewey's students and admirers (which might have included Lapolla) commissioned Epstein to do a bust of the eminent professor and presented the finished product to Columbia University.

Epstein's views on art and opinions of particular sculptors are virtually identical with those expressed by Lapolla in his novels. In *The Sculptor Speaks* (published in 1932, the same year *Miss Rollins* appeared), Epstein castigates both "anaemic" academicians (69) and the "attenuated" products of abstractionists (154). Responding to those modernists who denigrated the humanistic and psychological qualities of his sculptured portraits, he insists that great art must "quiver with life" (58); and that to be labelled a "master psychologist," as he was by his detractors, was synonymous with being called a "master sculptor" (958). Michelangelo, as one would expect, draws his praise, as does Rodin, the "greatest master of modern times" (122). Significantly, he contends that Donatello, the fifteenth-century namesake of Lapolla's sculptor, is the true father of modern European sculpture, since he was the first to create portraits that display an individual psychology (121). Finally, Epstein urges American sculptors to throw off their infatuation with European-spawned modernism and concentrate their efforts on the American scene, its unique ethnic elements in particular.³⁴

This is precisely Donato's goal by the end of the novel. Though he has been assimilated into the mainstream, he has not abandoned his ethnic heritage: "I'll go back to Michelangelo and express the present too" (336), he exclaims to Amy Rollins. Where does he find examples of soul-full American life to depict? Where else but in the ghetto, where young Epstein himself had. Donato's *Mam-ma 'Chele*, a bust of a wrinkled Italian woman, captures the "travail and hopes, sufferings and joys" (336) of old age—just as Epstein's *Old Italian Woman* does (see Figure Two). And among the brilliant successes that catapult him to fame after his marriage to Angel are such celebrations of the immigrant experience as *The Pioneer Grandmother*, *The Immigrants at Ellis Island* and *The Marionette Director*. When Robert Henri and his fellow social-realist painters revitalized American painting during the first decade of the century by turning to New York's slums for examples of "authentic" American life, their critics scornfully labelled them the "Ash Can" or "Ellis Island" artists.³⁵ Donato, no doubt, would wear the latter label proudly.

And so, I suspect, would Garibaldi Lapolla, whose portraits of the Italian-American artist, as should be apparent by now, objectify his own literary views. Like the emotion-charged, deeply spiritual, mimetic art works created by his "sensitive, passionate Latin" fictional characters, Lapolla's novels implicitly reject the formalistic, impersonal, obscurist and cynical poetics practiced by T. S. Eliot and other writers of the modern temper. Though they portray, in vivid detail, the sordid and violent East Harlem slums where Lapolla spent his youth, his fictions do not project a "Waste Land" vision of life. Rather, like Murillo's paintings or Epstein's sketches, Lapolla's art reveals the color, vitality, and dignity of life at the lower levels; even illiterate, coarse-mannered peasant immigrants may, after all, have a "bit of poetry" at the core of their being (*Grand Gennaro*, 351).



FIGURE TWO: Photograph of Jacob Epstein's bust titled *Old Italian Women* (1907-1908). Reprinted from *Jacob Epstein: A Catalogue of the Collection of Edward P. Schinman*, edited by Edward P. and Barbara Ann Schinman. Courtesy of Associated Presses, Inc.

Of course, a revolt against “aristocratic” modernism and a celebration of America’s downtrodden characterize a good deal of the art, both visual and literary, of the Depression era, when many artists came to view the slums as an archetype of American life, a sort of “Home Town, U.S.A.,” as Marcus Klein aptly puts it.³⁶ Much of the ghetto-centered literature produced during the decade, I hardly need add, falls into the “protest” or “proletarian” categories. Lapolla’s novels, however, do not. Though he focuses on the deprivations and injustices suffered by the “new” immigrants, Lapolla is by no means a “proletarian” novelist in the vein of a Michael Gold or of his fellow Italian-American writer, DiDonato (whose *Christ in Concrete* is precisely the kind of “working class” novel Gold called for). Indeed, without exception, the protagonists of Lapolla’s fiction—women as well as men—attain middle-class prosperity (higher, in Donato’s case), and they display no interest in Marxist ideology. Though they often curse the new land where money rather than God is worshipped and where parents lose the respect of their children (familiar complaints in immigrant literature), Lapolla’s urban villagers ultimately make their compromises; their nostalgic recollections of the old country are outweighed by the “enduring sense of pragmatism” that characterized their real-life counterparts.³⁷ In Sollors’s terms, “consent” overshadows “descent.”³⁸

And while they exhibit many of the defining traits of the literary naturalism that saw a resurgence in American literature during the 1930s—low-life characters and slum settings, detailed documentation of vulgar experience, sensationalistic violence and preoccupation with sexual themes (the shade of Freud hovers over all three of Lapolla’s novels)—Lapolla’s fictions defy classification as novels of naturalism. Though not necessarily deterministic in theme, the classics of American naturalism portray man as a victim of internal and external forces largely beyond his control. Often, those forces crush the protagonist, as, for example, occurs in Stephen Crane’s *Maggie* and James T. Farrell’s *Studs Lonigan*; but even when the characters aren’t destroyed (e.g., Theodore Dreiser’s *Carrie*), they do not gain the self-knowledge or philosophical perspective that brings inner peace. Thus, as Donald Pizer argues,³⁹ the movement in a naturalistic novel is either degenerative (the protagonist sinks into the abyss and is destroyed) or circular (the protagonist survives but does not move significantly upward on the moral scale).

Lapolla’s novels, in sharp contrast, are tales of spiritual regeneration, their protagonists elevated by suffering and love. The title character of *Grand Gennaro*, for example, is about as “grand” as Studs or McTeague (or Eliot’s Sweeney) when we first meet him. Likewise, at the beginning of *Fire in the Flesh*, Agnese has just emerged from a mountain cave where, alone, like an animal, she had birthed her illegitimate child; and the means she uses to “make America” are no less reprehensible than Gennaro’s. But suffering and love humanize and ennoble both characters as their respective stories unfold; they transcend their brutish instincts and in the end do indeed appear “grand” in the reader’s eyes. And Amy Rollins proves worthy of that term when, placing Donato’s happiness before her own, she conceals both her heartache and her pregnancy from him when she realizes he has fallen in love with the millionairess. Thus Lapolla’s novels display the ethical idealism—the belief that the

people can rise above corrupting and degrading influences to a higher moral plane—that marks the *Orlando Furioso*, *The Scarlet Letter* and romantic literature in general.

Indeed, if a label must be applied to Lapolla's novels, the most appropriate would be that coined by Frank Norris, "romances of the commonplace." In his "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" (1901), Norris contends that the romantic novel need not be peopled by aristocrats and located in an idyllic setting; the modern-day romancer, he pleads, should venture into the squalid tenements of New York's East Harlem to explore the "unplumbed depths of the human heart, and the mystery of sex, and the problems of life, and the black, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man."⁴⁰ Lapolla did precisely that.

I have developed Lapolla's connections with the romantic tradition in art and literature and with Depression America's revolt against the modern temper in order to demonstrate the inadequacy of a purely "ethnic" analysis of his fictional artists and of his novels overall. Certainly Lapolla's vivid depictions of Little Italy's *festas*, puppet theatres, padrone system, devotion to *la famiglia* and so on bring alive the "Italian-American experience." But to focus solely on the Italianate aspects of Lapolla's novels is to ignore what Sollors would call the "transethnic" elements that Lapolla, like his fictional artists, syncretizes in his art. Like the immigrant culture they portray, Lapolla's novels are an amalgam of the new and old cultures: The reader seeking a full comprehension of Lapolla's fiction must be as knowledgeable of *The Scarlet Letter*, Epstein's sculpture and Norris's plea for a romantic naturalism, as of the *Orlando Furioso*, the miracle of Saint Gennaro and Southern Italian folklife. Mediating the Italian and American, Lapolla, one might say, sought to "ethnicize" mainstream readers by dramatizing the "culture of everyday life" in the Italian ghetto, and at the same time to "Americanize" his *paesani* by implicitly endorsing assimilation and by projecting the new culture's values, ideals and opportunities. Which is to argue that, over a half century ago, one Mezzogiorno-born, Columbia-educated American writer was pointing the way "beyond ethnicity."

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notes

1. For background on Mezzogiorno culture and Italian immigration, see Richard Alba, *Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity* (New Jersey, 1985).

2. Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York, 1986).

3. John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington, 1985), 210.

4. Though Lapolla's name occasionally surfaces in scholarly discussions of Italian-American literature, the only critical examination of his fiction is Rose B. Green's insightful but narrowly focused essay in her book *The Italian-American Novel: A Document of the Interaction of Two Cultures* (Rutherford, New Jersey, 1974), 71-79. Her analysis of *Gennaro* is developed in some detail, but her discussions of Lapolla's other two novels are cursory. There is no biographical study of Lapolla.

5. Garibaldi M. Lapolla, *The Fire in the Flesh* (New York, 1975); *The Grand Gennaro* (New York, 1975); *Miss Rollins in Love* (New York, 1932). Subsequent references within the text are to these editions. Mark Van Doren, and Garibaldi M. Lapolla, eds., *The World's Best Poems* (New York, 1929).

6. Frederick Marsh, *New York Times Book Review* (September 1, 1935), 6.
7. *New York Times Book Review* (April 12, 1931), 6-7.
8. Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*.
9. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925; rpt. New York, 1980), 99.
10. Diego Angulo Iniguez, "Murillo: His Life and Work." *Bartolomé Esteban Murillo*. (London, 1982), 11-27.
11. Thomas Craven, *Men of Art* (Garden City, New York, 1931); John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York, 1934), 91.
12. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York, 1971), 13.
13. Italian puppetry and the *Orlando Furioso* figure prominently in Puzo's latest novel, *The Sicilian* (New York, 1984). Turi Guiliano, the book's bandit-hero, is strongly influenced by the chivalric ideals of Ariosto's epic romance, which he both reads and sees performed in the village puppet theatre (131).
14. Paul McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America: A History* (New York, 1949), 300.
15. Bil Baird, *The Art of the Puppet* (New York, 1965), 119.
16. *Theatre Arts Monthly* 12 (1928), 455-531.
17. Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York, 1975), 16.
18. Agrippino Manteo died in 1947, but his puppet theatre has been kept alive by his descendants, who continue to give special performances. In awarding Miguel Manteo (Agrippino's grandson) a National Endowment for the Arts grant in 1983, Frank Hodsoll described the Manteo theatre as a "national treasure—alive, well, and flourishing in Brooklyn" (Deborah Churchman, "'Papa' Manteo: Fifth Generation of Sicilian Puppeteers," *Christian Science Monitor*, 21 [July 1983], 1).
 Though there is no mention of puppets in *Grand Gennaro*, there might be a Manteo theatre connection. The Manteos annually celebrated the feast of Saint Gennaro (one of the most important of Italian *festas*) by dramatizing the saint's miraculous quelling of a Mount Vesuvius eruption. (Lapolla's Gennaro achieves heroic status by stilling his own volcanic nature.) Baird's reaction to the puppet performance suggests how it might have fired the imagination of a young Lapolla: "Even today," writes Baird, "when I have occasion to think of Saint Gennaro, it is the image of the marionette that occurs. . . . There is something about having the symbols right there in front of you, in three dimensions, no matter how stylized, that is very much the truth. . . . In the Middle Ages this must have been a powerful way to keep the memory of the miracle alive in people's minds" (*The Art of the Puppet*, 128-29).
19. Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 184ff; Clinton Machann, and James W. Mendl, *Krasna Amerika: A Study of the Texas Czechs, 1851-1939* (Austin, Texas, 1983), 161.
20. George Rickey, *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution* (New York, 1967).
21. *Ibid.*, 47.
22. Tom Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to Our House* (New York, 1981).
23. Milton W. Brown, et al., *American Art* (New York, 1979), 406.
24. Craven, *Men of Art*, xvii.
25. Robert Myron and Abner Sundell, *Modern Art in America* (New York, 1971), 164.
26. "Speak, speak, or the plague take you," the historical Donato (Donatello) is reported to have shouted at his *Zuccone* (H. W. Janson, *History of Art: A Survey of the Major Visual Arts from the Dawn of History to the Present Day* [2nd edition 1962, New Jersey, and New York, 1977]).
27. Auguste Rodin, *Art: Conversations with Paul Gsell*, translated by Jaques de Caso and Patricia B. Sanders (Berkeley, 1984), 19.
28. Albert E. Elsen, *Rodin* (New York, 1963), 199.
29. Rodin, *Art*, 100-101.
30. Louis Golding, "Persons and Personages, Michaelangelo of Today," *Living Age* (November 1939), 244-47.
31. If not the historical model for Chaim Potok's portrait of the Jewish-American artist in *My Name Is Asher Lev* (1972), Epstein certainly qualifies as Lev's real-life counterpart (though no one, to my knowledge, has made this observation). Like Lev, Epstein drew heavy criticism from Jewish-Americans who objected to his sculptural depiction of Christ and other figures of the Christian tradition.
32. Quoted in David M. Fine, *The City, the Immigrant and American Fiction 1880-1920* (New Jersey, 1977), 30.
33. Jacob Epstein, *Let There be Sculpture* (New York, 1940), 114-127.
34. Jacob Epstein, *The Sculptor Speaks: Jacob Epstein to Arnold L. Haskell*, Haskell (1932; rpt. New York, 1971), 154.
35. In the aims, subject matter, and technique of their art, Donato and Giovanni in fact exemplify Henri's ideal artist. Whether Lapolla's views on the arts

were influenced by Henri whose *The Art Spirit* (1923) was an immensely popular book, is a matter for conjecture; but there is no doubt that Lapolla (who was studying at Columbia and teaching in the New York schools during the years when Henri and the Eight were waging their controversial campaign against the National Academy of Design) shared Henri's aesthetics. For an introduction to Henri and the "Ash Can" movement, see William Innes Homer's *Robert Henri and His Circle* (Ithaca, 1969).

36. Marcus Klein, *Foreigners: The Making of American Literature 1900-1940* (Chicago, 1981), 184.

37. Bodner, *The Transplanted*, 56.

38. Sollers, *Beyond Ethnicity*.

39. Donald Pizer, *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation* (Carbondale, 1982), 9.

40. Frank Norris, *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, ed. Donald Pizer (Austin, Texas, 1964), 78.