

ANDREA ACQUALAGNA

Università degli Studi di Bergamo

“Frozen Stillness”: The American Sublime and the Meteorological Element of Snow in John Fante’s “Books of Youth”

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the representation of snow in John Fante’s novels *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938) and *1933 Was a Bad Year* (1985). While acknowledging its symbolic meanings, I contend that in Fante’s “books of youth”, the meteorological element primarily emerges as a sublime manifestation of nature that, by impeding human activity, resists conquest and mastery. Moving from a complex and gendered understanding of the American sublime, the analysis focuses on the characters’ conflicted relationship with the snowy mountainous landscape of Colorado and their imaginative retreat into an idealized, springlike California. Interpreting snow as a narrative catalyst for brutality and death, this paper examines the familial animosities represented in the novels through the lens of the passive immobility fostered by the meteorological element. By situating Fante’s novels within an American literary tradition that inscribes a twofold meaning in the nation’s natural landscape, this interpretation also seeks to move beyond their traditional categorization as ethnic literature.

KEYWORDS: John Fante, American Sublime, snow, Colorado, California

1. Introduction: The American sublime and the twofold perception of nature

“How does one stand / To behold the sublime?” (Stevens 1935 [1971: 130]), wonders Wallace Stevens’s speaker in the 1935 poem “The American Sublime”. As emphasized by literary scholar Rob Wilson, Stevens’s metaphysical question, within an American context where the term sublime eludes a precise definition, “reverts into a more genealogical one worrying the context of any such sublimating perspective” (Wilson 1991: 3). The question, therefore, becomes: How does one stand to behold the American sublime?

In contrast with a European tradition of sublimity which identifies the sublime as a response in the bewitched spectator of the untamable natural realm (Burke

1823; Kant 1764), upon crossing the Atlantic, the concept of the sublime underwent an ideological transformation primarily ascribable to the vastness of the American landscape, its symbolic potential, and its imaginatively unconstrained extension. Despite varying interpretations of the concept, as Joseph Kronick observes, European treatments of the sublime “involve a dialectic whereby difference is maintained between self and other” (Kronick 1986: 54), where the self is the realm of the human actively experiencing the sublime and the other is the realm of the inhuman – namely the wild and untamed natural dimension – generating such a sublimating experience. Exceeding this dichotomous construction, the American rendition of the sublime overturns the long-established, delineated relation between self and nature,¹ emancipating the contemplating subject and ascribing sublimity to the contemplated scenery. The concept of the sublime emerges therefore in its first etymological meaning of boundary:² between the self and nature in the European interpretation and, as highlighted by Harold Bloom (who in turn recurs to Emersonian transcendentalism), between “*I and the Abyss*” in the American. Here “the Abyss” represents European tradition and history, “while for ‘I’ we can read ‘any American’” (Bloom 1976: 255).

In this rearticulation, the imaginatively boundless natural dimension becomes a space in which the American subject may inscribe meaning, rather than a force that generates an aesthetic experience in the beholder, as in the European tradition. Thus, in the words of Donald Pease, “in the ideological American rendition, the sublime was not man’s but Nature’s discourse” (Pease 1986: 46). Through this subtle turn of the American sublime, argues the scholar, the anthropogenic design of nature’s commodification was justified and promoted in the national process of westward expansion. If, as noted by Henry Nash Smith, the ideological character of the nation was primarily defined “by a relation between man and nature – or rather, even more narrowly, between American man and the American West”

¹ In opposition with the Burkian or Kantian contemplating subjects always distinct from the contemplated landscape, the Emersonian (and later Whitmanesque) self ascends to an ontological plane whereby the contemplation of the natural dimension leads to a dissolution of egotism and the blurring of the boundary between the observant and the object of observation. In *Nature*, Emerson first theorizes the resolution of this dichotomy recurring to the image of the transparent eye-ball: “Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God” (Emerson 1836: 13).

² From the Latin *sublimis*, compound of *sub* (under, beneath) and *limen* (threshold) (Onions (ed.) 1966: 880).

(Smith 1950 [1978: 187]), then the *Americanization* of the sublime is functional to this relation and "helped to consolidate an American identity founded in representing a landscape of immensity and wildness ('power') open to multiple identifications ('use')" (Wilson 1991: 5).

From this perspective, the sublime no longer designates an ideological aesthetic category but comes to signify the still-untamed natural dimension that resists and opposes domestication, though it remains open to imaginative projection. As such, the sublime functions as a counterforce to the national logic of conquest and domestication,³ which envisions American nature as a potential idyllic space of anthropogenic control – a vision that resonates with Smith's myth of the Garden and Leo Marx's pastoralism (Smith 1950; Marx 1964). In other words, when applied to the American context, the sublime evokes that which remains untamed, or rather, that which has not yet been tamed and resists domestication. This conception of the American landscape produces a tension wherein nature is celebrated insofar as it is domesticated, though imaginatively emerging as untamed and unbounded.

This seemingly self-contradictory relation with nature, explains Louise Westling, is reiterated in American literature (Westling 2013: 4): Emerson's foundational essay "Nature", for example, celebrates nature as a divine and emancipating force but ends with a call for "the kingdom of man over nature" (Emerson 1836: 95). Likewise, at the beginning of "Walking", Thoreau presents himself as a spokesperson "for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness" (Thoreau 1862: 657), yet he goes on to acclaim the process of westward expansions at the expense of the very wildness he had praised. Many other examples can be provided, as scholars have widely observed this dichotomous perception of nature across American literature. Such a reading, though, has yet to be extended to the writings of John Fante, whose work provides an interesting approach of this very tension, as this paper attempts to demonstrate. Through an analysis of the sublime landscape of Colorado – exemplified by the recurring motif of snow

³ In his groundbreaking study *The Machine in the Garden*, with the term counterforce, Leo Marx refers to a vision that resists the national logic of nature's domestication, "either from the side bordering upon intractable nature or the side facing advanced civilization" (Marx 1964 [1967: 25-26]). Disregarding the latter, which aligns rather to what Frederic Jameson defines as "postmodern or technological sublime" (Jameson 1992: 37), with the term counterforce, I refer here to the former, which, in line with Rob Nixon's concept of non-human resistance, identifies the powerful retaliation of the targeted natural dimension "which may prove harder to commodify and profitably remove or manage" (Nixon 2011: 21).

– and the contrasting idyllic vision of a longed-for, imagined California in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938) and *1933 Was a Bad Year* (1985), this paper attempts to position Fante within this distinctly American literary tradition that inscribes a twofold meaning in the nation's natural topography. This interpretation not only aligns with recent approaches to Fante's works which have underlined the primary relevance of space in his production (Barattin 2021; Hawthorn 2018; Mariani 2018), but also aims at moving beyond the author's inscription within Italian American Studies – a critical framework that, though having substantially contributed to Fante's "rediscovery" and fortune in the late 1980s, has also determined his categorization as a niche author and impeded his rightful inclusion to American canonical literature.

2. Fante's "Books of Youth" and their critical reception

"Frozen stillness" (Fante 1985a: 25) is how Dominic Molise, the young protagonist of Fante's posthumous novel *1933 Was a Bad Year*,⁴ describes the snowy and mountainous landscape of Roper, his hometown in Colorado. Transcending a mere meteorological depiction of the spatial setting of the novel, Dominic's definition powerfully evokes the restraining and overwhelming potential of the region's natural dimension, as well as the helplessness of the human response to it, becoming an accurate characterization of the sublime force of nature in Fante's works. Described by Ruth Hawthorn "as a writer centrally concerned by ideas of place" (Hawthorn 2018: 767), Fante situates his extremely space-conscious protagonists in distinctive environments that do not solely stand out as the geographical backgrounds where his picaresque heroes move, but also as spatial realities imbued with a profoundly symbolic significance, especially when read through the lens of the twofold perception of the American West's natural landscape.

In spite of the recurring manifestation of the sublime throughout Fante's work – most notably in the representation of the desert and the earthquake in *Ask the*

⁴ Even though the novel was only published in 1985, Fante had started working on the book in the first half of the 1950s. In a letter of February 1954, probably addressed to Stanley Salomen of Little Brown, the author notes: "I put in two months thinking, writing, and rewriting the novel we talked about at the Beverly Hills Hotel; story of the boy who runs away to become a big league ballplayer" (Fante 1991: 231). Defined as "not 'important'" and compared to *Full of Life* (1952) – a novel that Fante admitted was "only written for money" (294) –, *1933 Was a Bad Year* was set aside and only retrieved after the author's death.

Dust –, it is in his novels set in mountainous environments that the overwhelming, annihilative force of nature is most vividly and insistently rendered. These works, which Elisa Bordin classifies as "mountain writings" (Bordin 2019: 32), are predominantly set in the snowy Colorado landscape of the author's youth – with the notable exception of the 1977 novel *The Brotherhood of the Grape*, set in Northern California. Besides placing particular emphasis on the Italian descent, these works feature an interesting tension between human activity and natural impediments: a tension that stands at the center of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and 1933 *Was a Bad Year* and emerges in relation to the characters' conflicted relation with the meteorological element of snow.⁵ Despite the significant time interval that separates their writing, the two novels share numerous thematic and narrative analogies that have led scholars to place them in close relation to one another. Catherine Kordich, for example, groups them – along with the novella "The Orgy" – under the label "books of youth" and argues that 1933 *Was a Bad Year* "shows Fante taking *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*'s childhood poverty and ethnic marginalization to its teenage consequence" (Kordich 2000: 19) with the most evident difference being the age of the protagonists.

The similar narrative structures of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and 1933 *Was a Bad Year* revolve around what Richard Collins has defined as "epiphany of failure", a process of familial reconciliation after an initial collision determined by the individual's aspirations and dreams of assimilation (Collins 2000: 20). In the case of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, the paternal figure of Svevo Bandini abandons his wife, Maria, and his three children at Christmas for an affair with the wealthy American widow Effie Hildegard, momentarily impairing the stability of the family microcosm. The precarious domestic order is ultimately safeguarded by the fourteen-year-old Arturo, who, bringing his father back home, draws to a close what Ernesto Livorni has defined as his "Telemachy" (Livorni 1998: 56). Likewise, in 1933 *Was a Bad Year*, the familial tensions are determined by the sports dreams of seventeen-year-old Dominic Molise. Whereas his father expects him to become a bricklayer, Dominic steals and attempts to sell his father's concrete mixer to gather enough money to reach California and try out as a pitcher for the Chicago Cubs. As in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, also in 1933 *Was a Bad Year* the domestic animosities are eventually resolved; in this case by the paternal figure

⁵ In addition to the two novels analyzed in this paper, the other work by Fante that primarily features this tension in relation to the sublime element of snow is the short story "Bricklayer in the Snow" originally included in the 1940 short-story collection *Dago Red*.

who sells his mixer, symbol of his working struggles and source of revenue for the family, eventually accepting Dominic's aspirations and paying for the ticket to reach California.

Like the rest of Fante's "mountain writings," the two novels analyzed in this paper resort primarily to the themes of ethnic heritage and intergenerational cultural discrepancies between first- and second-generations migrants. Scholars have primarily concentrated on the analogies between the author's life and his works, detecting as their main tropes the protagonists' conflicted relationship with their Italian descent, the religiously drenched parental conflicting dialectic, and, specifically for *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, the juxtaposition between Italian and American models of masculinity. Indeed, the majority of critical studies on *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* have placed it alongside the works of Pietro di Donato (Béranger 1994; De Lucia 2007) and Jerre Mangione (Buonomo 2003), or both (Gardaphé 1999, 2004). Moreover, even the studies that do not explicitly associate the novel with the works of other Italian American writers focus primarily on the characters' conflicted relationship with Italian culture, either from the paternal (D'Alfonso 2012; Marinaccio 2009), or filial perspective (Mattevi 2009). While *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* has extensively been studied by Fante's scholars, *1933 Was a Bad Year* has received scant critical attention, with the most noteworthy study by Collins (Collins 1994), concentrating on the connections between baseball and ethics in the novel.

The primary relevance of the Colorado environment and the underlying allegorical symbolism of the element of snow in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year* are components detected by the majority of scholars, but only the works by Melissa Ryan and Mirko Mondillo have called attention to the relations between the landscape in Fante's first novel and the national rhetoric at the heart of the American process of conquest and domestication of the natural dimension. While Ryan, drawing from Leo Marx, suggests that *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* replicates the rhetorical model of imaginative conquest that has characterized America's mythical foundations (Ryan 2004: 187), Mondillo, in his study on *Tobacco Road* (1932) by Erskine Caldwell,⁶ identifies and collocates Fante's first novel within an American narrative production that opposes the spatial dimensions of wilderness and plantation (Mondillo 2020: 111). Despite the scholars' original recognition of this correlation, this insight is only at the

⁶ Mondillo argues that, alongside *Hunger* (1890) by Knut Hamsun, Caldwell's novel is *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*'s primary source of inspiration (Mondillo 2020: 115).

germinal stage: whereas Mondillo only hints at Fante in his analysis of Caldwell's novel, Ryan's finding of a pastoral ideal in Fante's narrative is secondary and subjected to the analysis of the characters' imaginative construction of their American identities and symbolic "homes". Moreover, these readings are restricted to a pastoral interpretation of the natural landscapes represented in the novel, when in fact I believe that Fante's "books of youth" primarily feature a sublime force, which in what follows is analyzed in relation to the meteorological element of snow.

3. The immobilizing power of snow and its violent reverberations

Snow is a recurring motif in Italian American literature, dating back at least to Pascal D'Angelo's autobiography *Son of Italy* (1924). In Fante's "books of youth", however, it acquires a distinct narrative function, epitomizing a sublime natural force that actively resists conquest, domestication, and mastery. The aversion to snow as an overwhelming element that impedes human activity is evident from the first lines of the two novels. Indeed, both *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and *1933 Was a Bad Year* open with a character's acrimonious meditation while walking home "through flames of snow" (Fante 1985a: 7). While *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* opens with the paternal figure of Svevo Bandini cursing and kicking the deep snow, in *1933 Was a Bad Year* the character trudging through the white mounds is that of the young Dominic Molise. Despite the same thematic use of snow as an immobilizing force, these diverse openings become emblematic of the novels' differing narrative perspectives. Whereas *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* presents a polyphony of voices that makes the father, the son, and the mother simultaneous protagonists of the novel, *1933 Was a Bad Year* centers on Dominic and his effort to overcome both familial expectations and the constraints of the Colorado winter. In this respect – differently from Fante's first novel but in continuity with the rest of the author's literary production –, *1933 Was a Bad Year* adopts a first-person narrator whose struggles, ambitions, and imaginative self-fashioning assume indisputable preponderancy in the narrative. This divergence in narrative perspective, however, only reinforces the correlation between the two novels with regard to the contemptuous attitude toward the snow, as it evokes an intertextual relation between the paternal and filial figures. Indeed, in addition to the more immediate connection between the two young characters of Arturo and Dominic – linked by their similar age, dreams, constraints, and roles in the

family –,⁷ a more subtle connection between Svevo and Dominic also emerges, when the incipits of the novels are compared. Snow, in fact, not only forces Arturo and Dominic to “wait until spring” to pursue their dreams of baseball glory but it also impedes the bricklaying activity of the two paternal characters – Svevo and Dominic’s father, who is left unnamed in the narrative. Hence, the narratives and destinies of fathers and sons appear intrinsically connected and contingent upon the restraining potential of the snowy Colorado landscape. The four figures thus converge into a composite character, which Rocco Marinaccio identifies in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* as “the dreamer awaiting the rebirth of spring and a return to the activity” (Marinaccio 2009: 43): a tragic individual, who, paralyzed by the sublime nature of the cool Colorado winter, fantasizes about the arrival of the warm season and imaginatively withdraws to an idealized California.

This emblematic paralysis, however, not only prompts an imaginative escape to an idyllic, springlike dimension, but it also harbors a more ominous potential, as it evokes a mournful presage and often gives way to violent impulses. There is therefore little doubt, as Kordich observes, that “Fante places considerable symbolic weight on snow”, as it not only epitomizes a dismaying immobilizing force but also renders the characters “most vulnerable to themselves and to each other” (Kordich 2000: 23). Snow – and the sublime dimension of nature more broadly – becomes in the two novels a narrative catalyst for brutality and death. From their very openings, in fact, both works recur to the meteorological element to foreground the subjects’ fears, dismay, and denied opportunities, which in turn prompt an aggressive response and an impending sense of doom. Whereas the former is at the center of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, the latter emerges more clearly in the opening of 1933 *Was a Bad Year*. On his way home through the snow, in fact, Dominic “stopped dead” amid the freezing landscape, sensing “certain forces in the world at work trying to destroy” him (Fante 1985a: 7). Reminded of Grandma Bettina’s belief that “snowflakes were the souls in heaven returning to Earth for brief visits” (10), Fante’s protagonist links the white crystals to “the dead from the beginning of time” (10).

I held out my hand and many flakes fell upon it, alive and star-shaped for a few seconds, and who could say? Perhaps the soul of Grandpa Giovanni, dead seven years

⁷ If we accept Kordich’s collocation of 1933 *Was a Bad Year* within the Bandini tetralogy (Kordich 2000: 46) – as following *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and preceding *Ask the Dust* – this connection is further reinforced by the protagonist’s middle name of Dominic in the latter novel.

now, and Joe Hardt, our third baseman, killed last summer on his motorcycle, and all of my father's people in the faraway mountains of Abruzzi, great-aunts and uncles I had never known, all vanished from the earth. And the others, the billions who lived a while and went away, the poor soldiers killed in battle, the sailors lost at sea, the victims of plague and earthquake, the rich and the poor. (10)

While in 1933 *Was a Bad Year* snow invites the protagonist to contemplate the spectral presence of the dead and reflect on the ephemeral and transient quality of human life, in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* the same sublime element provokes a visceral reaction that leads Svevo to channel his physical and verbal violence against nature and God. The bricklayer, in fact, kicking the "suffocating snow" (Fante 1938 [1983: 12]) and glancing up at the snow-capped mountains, curses God and the meteorological element impeding the act of construction: "*Dio cane. Dio cane.* It means God is a dog, and Svevo Bandini was saying it to the snow" (13). This initial blasphemous reaction to snow suggests, as Mondillo argues, that Fante's novel develops along two structural tensions: between man and nature and between nature and the divine – with the latter emerging as a response to the first (Mondillo 2020: 111). In other words, Fante's narrative presents a triangular correlation between the human, the natural, and the divine; a tension ultimately resolved by the bricklayer through violence against the sublime manifestation of nature and blasphemy against its transcendent creating agent.

Snow's immobilizing power, then, goes beyond merely hindering the process of construction – as encapsulated by the bricklayer's blunt remark "no sunshine, no work" (11) – and compels Fante's characters to channel their frustration into acts of fierce and disruptive violence. These are often directed at female figures, who are symbolically linked to the sublime. This gendered dynamic – evocative of the imperialist rhetoric of the "land-as-woman" identified by Annette Kolodny in the colonial imagination of the American natural landscape (Kolodny 1975) – is central in Fante's works. While perhaps the clearest example is the association between Camilla Lopez and the harsh, untamed Mojave Desert at the end of *Ask the Dust*, the recurring connection drawn by male characters between women and snow – and the violence that originates from it – in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* is equally significant. This becomes evident, when, after shoving her into the snow and foretelling her death, Arturo projects the image of his beloved classmate, Rosa Pinelli, onto the Colorado mountainous landscape: "This was Rosa's land. This was Rosa's tree. Because you've looked at it, because maybe you've touched it. And those are Rosa's mountains, and maybe she's looking at them now" (226). Yet, it is above all in Svevo's relationship with Maria that this dynamic

of projection and violence most powerfully unfolds. Indeed, although Svevo's reactionary violence provoked by his impossibility to lay brick in the Colorado winter is initially directed at the snow – and at God for allowing its presence – this is soon deflected: first against inanimate objects symbolically linked to the cold landscape – Arturo's sled, the frozen laces of his run-down shoes, and the malfunctioning stove – and ultimately against his wife, Maria.⁸

Since her first mention in the novel, Maria is associated with snow: “the beautiful white snow was like the beautiful white wife of Svevo Bandini” (12). As scholars have noted, this association is undoubtedly symbolical as it gestures toward a complex interplay of themes – sexual, ethnic, religious, and socio-economic – that underpin Svevo's conflicted subjectivity. Following the bricklayer's train of thought, in fact, the correlation between Maria and snow promptly spirals into reflections on her sexuality and faith – and his simultaneous revulsion – as well as the crushing reality of his poverty and the impossibility of homeownership.

And then he shuddered as you do when cold metal touches your flank, and he was suddenly remembering the many times he had got into the warm bed beside Maria, and the tiny cold cross on her rosary touched his flesh on winter nights like a tittering little cold serpent, and how he withdrew quickly to an even colder part of the bed, and then he thought of the bedroom, of the house that was not paid for, of the white wife endlessly waiting for passion, and he could not endure it, and straightway in his fury he plunged into deeper snow off the sidewalk, letting his anger fight it out with the snow.
Dio cane. Dio cane. (14)

In this light, in line with scholarly interpretations, snow emblematically functions as a powerful symbol of Svevo's status as a poor immigrant who, despite his efforts and desires, remains unable to fully assimilate into American society and transcend the constraints of his ethnicity – embodied by his wife. Yet beyond its metaphorical resonance, it is snow's material force – as the sublime element that freezes the mortar between the bricks Svevo lays – that most viscerally wounds his pride and calls his manhood into question, impeding the act of construction and

⁸ Maria – or Mary in 1933 *Was a Bad Year* – is the name of the maternal figure in all of Fante's “mountain works”, with the exception of the novella “The Orgy”, where the name is not specified. The recurrence of this name is highly symbolic, as Fante's works set in mountainous environments are largely concerned with the characters' relationship with their Italian cultural and religious descent, primarily personified by the maternal figure. The emblematic significance of the name becomes clear in this passage from *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*: “Her name was Maria, and so was the Savior's mother, and she had gone to that other Maria over miles and miles of rosary beads” (Fante 1938 [1983: 32]).

determining his impotence. In this sense, Kolodny's "land-as-woman" metaphor proves particularly resonant: the act of construction, as a gesture of domestication and control over the American landscape, becomes metaphorically aligned with sexual conquest. As Ryan insightfully argues, "to conquer the wilderness or to own land is, on the level of metaphor, never quite separable from 'having' a woman, possessing her sexually" (Ryan 2004: 191). Svevo's reactionary rage to Maria and his impossibility to answer her demands for passion thus mirrors a deeper crisis: the humiliation of being rendered impotent by a sublime landscape that resists mastery.

4. Tainting whiteness with blood: The illusion of conquest and mastery

The sense of impotence that Svevo experiences in front of the sublime snow of the Colorado winter finds a counterpoint in the figure of the wealthy American widow, Effie Hildegard. By providing Svevo with both employment – the repair of her fireplace – and the practical means to pursue it – an oil heater – Effie metaphorically presents herself not only as an alternative to his wife, but above all as an answer to his seasonal impediments. Svevo, in fact, notes triumphantly: "Let the winter blow! Let the temperature drop to freezing. Let the snow pile up and bury the town! He didn't care: tomorrow there was work. And after that, there would always be work. The Widow Hildegard liked him; she respected his ability. With her money and his ability there would always be work enough to laugh at the winter" (Fante 1938 [1983: 183-184]). Whereas Maria, likened to snow, embodies the natural and sublime forces that obstruct construction and conquest, Effie represents agency, warmth, and the possibility of mastery, to the point that, in Svevo's mind, she comes to personify the oil heater itself.

Bandini stood before the heater as though it was the Widow herself. He whistled in astonishment. This was too much for any man – too much. "A fine woman," he said, shaking his head. "Very fine woman."

Suddenly there were tears in his eyes. The trowel fell from his hands as he dropped to his knees to examine the shining, nickel-plated heater. "You're the finest woman in this town, Mrs. Hildegard, and when I get through with this fireplace you'll be damn proud of it!"

Once more he returned to his work, now and then smiling at the heater over his shoulder, speaking to it as though it were his companion. "Hello there, Mrs. Hildegard! You still there? Watching me, eh? Got your eye on Svevo Bandini, have you? Well, you're looking at the best bricklayer in Colorado, lady." (189-190)

From this perspective, the extramarital relationship between Svevo and Effie appears not as the result of lust, romance, or deliberate infidelity, but rather as a pragmatic response to “the wrath of winter” (171). As Marinaccio argues, the adulterous intercourse is undeniably charged with symbolic meaning, as it constitutes for the impoverished Italian bricklayer a solution to his ethnic, socio-economic, and sexual anxieties, standing in for “his long-deferred, heroic ‘making of America’” (Marinaccio 2009: 51). Nevertheless, before taking on this symbolic weight, the encounter with Effie emerges, above all, as Svevo’s immediate and practical response to the elemental hostility of the sublime snow, as he explains when he attempts to justify himself: “I got lots of troubles, Maria. The kids. The house. The snow: look at the snow tonight, Maria. Can I set a brick down in it?” (171).

Snow, however, remains in the narrative a symbol of immobility and violence from which the bricklayer cannot ultimately escape. Svevo’s return home on Christmas Eve, in fact, demonstrates that his sexual and professional assertion and temporary subtraction from the cruel dynamics of the cold Colorado winter was only a momentary illusion. Hurling herself at her husband and clawing his eyes, Maria subverts the passive role in which she had been confined and inaugurates a process of reversal in the dynamics of power and authority of the domestic sphere. Leaving profound lacerations on his face, Maria stains with her husband’s blood – the blood of “Bandini, hater of snow” (25) – the sublime meteorological element she had been compared to. Furthermore, Svevo’s humiliation is compounded, as the bricklayer, in a final, ironic gesture of defeat, turns to the very snow he had cursed to soothe the pain of his wounds, pressing it against his lacerated face. The snow, once the enemy to be tamed, becomes instead his only source of relief as the bricklayer, eventually rendered again passive and submissive in the face of the sublime forces of the Colorado winter, taints the meteorological element with his own blood. Thus, the image of the white – and feminized – snow stained with Svevo’s blood comes to represent the ultimate failure of the – masculine – attempt to dominate and tame the sublime nature of the Colorado landscape. At the same time, it also stands as a powerful symbol of Svevo’s humiliation and emasculation: both as a metaphorical loss of “virginity” in his first sexual relationship with an American woman – according to Marinaccio, Svevo becomes Effie’s prostitute (Marinaccio 2009: 60) – and as a symbolic act of surrender before the overwhelming force of snow. As such, it becomes something, that according to Arturo, “nobody should see” (164). The

young protagonist, therefore, attempting to conceal his father's abasing bleeding, kicks clean snow over the red spots – a gesture that mirrors Svevo's initial reaction towards the sublime and foreshadows the internalization of paternal failure and shame.

The image of snow spotted with blood recurs at other times in Fante's works. In another scene from *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, for example, Arturo, weary of eating eggs, kills an old hen by throwing a lump of coal at its head, leaving "a zig-zag of brilliant red painting weird patterns in the snow" (46) – this unsettling image could be read not only in relation to the interplay of violence, death, and snow, but also as an assertion of human power and control over nature.⁹ Another recurrence of the image of blood-stained snow occurs at the end of *Dreams from Bunker Hill* when, just like Svevo in Fante's first novel, Arturo uses snow to make his face stop bleeding after being punched by the football player Biff Newhouse (Fante 1982: 143). The motif reaches its most emblematic expression in the last chapter of 1933 *Was a Bad Year*. In this scene, the image of snow stained with blood not only reinforces the intertextual connection between the two characters of Svevo and Dominic – and more broadly between the two novels in their portrayal of violence and snow – but it also marks the resolution of the fraught relationship between father and son. Indeed, at the height of their violent confrontation, Dominic's father punches him in the nose for having stolen his cement mixer and challenges him to a fight. Yet upon seeing his son bleeding, "he rushed into the alley and plunged his hands into the snow and hurried back with two dripping handfuls [sic]" (Fante 1985a: 117-118) to press them to his son's face. It is precisely at the sight of blood that Dominic's father, putting aside his wounded pride, crouches down to the snow and offers it to his son to alleviate his pain and stop the bleeding. For the first time, he recognizes his son's suffering, and listening to his aspirations and dreams, he seems to understand that his son, like himself, is trapped, limited, and ultimately victimized by his Italian descent, his poverty, and the sublime, immobilizing winter of Colorado. Moved by this recognition, he not only approves of his son's departure to California – despite his wish for Dominic to follow in his footsteps as a bricklayer – but also supports him financially, giving

⁹ This observation oversimplifies what is in fact a recurring and complex trope in Fante's works: the simultaneously conflicting and harmonious relationship with animals, a theme never analyzed by scholars. Though there are examples of this interesting dynamic in almost every longer work of the author, the most noteworthy and exemplifying is the protagonist's bizarre interaction with crabs in *The Road to Los Angeles* (Fante 1985b: 31-35).

him all he could gather from the sale of his mixer, the indispensable tool of his trade and the very object whose theft had sparked the conflict.

Maybe the bloody nose was responsible, but for once we stopped being father and son and became friends, and I was able to tell him of my hopes and despairs, the boredom of poverty, the chance to leave home and try my hand at pro ball. He lit a cigar and walked to the door, his back to me, and I spilled out my dream as clouds of smoke filled the shed. When he turned to face me there was no anger or disappointment in his face, but a softness, a desire to understand and sympathize. (118)

This peculiar moment of intimacy and mutual recognition marks a rare suspension of the hierarchical and often conflictual relationship between father and son that characterizes Fante's works – especially his “books of youth.” Yet, this reconciliation is not born out of genuine hope but, catalyzed by the sight of Dominic's blood – on snow –, rather emerges from a moment of surrender and resignation. Dominic's father eventually seems to realize his inability to ease his son's struggles, recognizing them as a reflection of his own. In implicitly accepting the futility of resisting a fate shaped by the “frozen stillness” of the Colorado winter, he surrenders to the only choice left to him: channeling his last resources into his son's journey to California. In selling his mixer, he not only relinquishes the prospect of passing down his trade to Dominic, but, in fact, he forsakes his own profession altogether. This decision thus takes shape as a resolution born of failure, in line with Collins' reading of the dynamics of family appeasements in Fante's novels (Collins 2000: 20). In spite of the restoration of a fragile sense of domestic peace, Dominic's father tacitly concedes defeat to the overpowering force of the Colorado winter and the sublime snow that impedes construction. In parting with his mixer, he surrenders also his role as the family's provider, entrusting his ultimate hope to Dominic's journey – less the hopeful pursuit of a better future than a quiet concession to the impossibility of change within the snowbound reality he inhabits.

The poignant reconciliation between father and son at the end of *1933 Was a Bad Year* resonates with the final scene of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, further emphasizing how closely linked – both thematically and structurally – these two novels are. In this scene, Arturo, accompanied by his new stray hound, Jumbo, reaches Effie's house to persuade his father to return home. Here, the resolution between father and son is ultimately prompted by the widow's racist insults toward Arturo, as she complains about the nauseating smell caused by the rotting corpse of a rabbit his dog retrieved from the melting snow and refuses to part with – yet another sign of the persistent connection between the meteorological

element and death. Just like the resolution in 1933 *Was a Bad Year*, the domestic tensions in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* are ultimately unraveled at the expense of the paternal figure. As Marinaccio observes, this scene shows Svevo being further "humiliated in front of his son and unable to maintain the delusion of his mastery of the widow and his assimilation" (Marinaccio 2009: 62). Not only does Svevo return home stripped of his authority and virility – Arturo promptly observes that "his face still showed the marks of Christmas Eve" (Fante 1938 [1983: 258-259]) –, but the woman he believed could be the antidote to his seasonal unemployment, and who he thought admired his bricklaying as a form of art, ultimately sees him as nothing more than a poor, pathetic, foreign bricklayer, whom she seduces on her own terms. Nevertheless, while Svevo may endure humiliation and accept being labeled a "peasant" and a "foreigner" himself, he cannot tolerate the same judgment being passed onto his American-born son: "That's my boy. You can't talk to him like that. That boy's an American. He is no foreigner" (265). Thus, both paternal figures in the novels are ultimately doomed to failure – a failure sparked by the recognition that the illusion of conquest and mastery through the (sexualized) act of construction is unsustainable, and one that metaphorically extends to the impossibility of transcending their ethnic origins and socioeconomic marginality. Yet, both endure humiliation in an attempt to prevent this failure from being internalized and passed on to their children.

In both novels, therefore, snow undoubtedly serves as a powerful and multifaceted catalyst for symbolic meanings, becoming the element through which conflicts, violence, death, humiliation, the failure of mastery, and the possibility of familial reconciliation are articulated. However, contrary to Ryan's assertion that in Fante's first novel, "while we hear much about the snow [...] there is no sense of pervasive cold" and winter is chiefly significant "as a symbolic event more than a phenomenon of the body" (Ryan 2004: 189), I argue that snow in Fante's "books of youth" functions not merely as a metaphorical backdrop to represent the characters' sexual, ethnic, and socio-economic limitations, but as a sublime element that both shapes the characters' fates and underscores the existential immobility from which they seek escape. Despite the underlying symbolical meanings associated with the meteorological element, snow and cold ultimately emerge as lethal, sublime manifestations of nature that, precisely in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, determine Rosa Pinelli's death from pneumonia. Eventually, the novel closes with Svevo and Arturo's homeward journey as the snow is starting to melt and the first glimpse of clear sky appears, auguring the coming of a warmer season. Nevertheless, Svevo's auspicious and forward-looking remark on the arrival of spring is promptly sapped

by the fall of one last snowflake, maybe – in line with Grandma Bettina's beliefs – the soul of young Rosa Pinelli returning to Earth.

Bandini looked at a patch of blue in the east.

"Pretty soon we'll have spring," he said.

"We sure will!"

Even as he spoke something tiny and cold touched the back of his hand. He saw it melt, a small star-shaped snowflake... (266)

Thus, through its cyclical structure – framed by the centrality of the sublime meteorological element at both the beginning and the end –, Fante's novel closes in a Joycean echo, as snow falls upon all the living and the dead.

5. Conclusion: The road to California

Defined at the beginning of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* as the "rear end of God's creation" (Fante 1938 [1983: 16]), Colorado ultimately emerges in Fante's "books of youth" as a sublime natural landscape of violence and death that, subjugating the characters to a condition of immobility, renders them passive victims of their own ethnic, socio-economic, and sexual anxieties. Yet this condition of annihilation simultaneously fosters an imaginative retreat into an idyllic, springlike dimension – an idealized natural space that, in line with the propaganda of the time, finds its emblem in California.¹⁰ Emerging as an imagined dimension of renewal and hope, California becomes a quixotic frontier juxtaposed with the wintry and bleak domestic space of Colorado. Whereas in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* this imaginative withdrawal appears moderately, chiefly as a response to Svevo's seasonal work impediments, it is in 1933 *Was a Bad Year* that it becomes a central trope. In his homeward journey through the snow, at the beginning of Fante's first novel, Svevo's initial thought is a bitter questioning of why he never moved to California:

¹⁰ At the turn of the twentieth century and through the mid-1920s, a group of influential politicians, writers, and publicists crafted a narrative that marketed Southern California as an idyllic promised land. With the aim of luring settlers from the East and Midwest and profit from land speculation, the so-called boosters celebrated the region for its unique Mediterranean climate, affordable land, and abundant job opportunities. In reaction to this propagandistic rhetoric, a literary tradition – later defined by Mike Davis as *Noir* (Davis 2006) – emerged by the late 1920s. Inaugurated by writers such as James M. Cain and Horace McCoy, this regional fiction dismantled the idealized vision of Southern California by turning each alluring promise into its dark and ominous counterpart. Scholars like Davis and Mark Laurila (Laurila 1999) align Fante's Los Angeles novels with this specific literary tradition.

"It harassed him always, that beautiful snow. He could never understand why he didn't go to California. Yet he stayed in Colorado, in the deep snow" (Fante 1938 [1983: 12]). This self-query, which according to Kordich is a rhetorical question "for surely he is too poor for such a journey" (Kordich 2000: 30), points up the way California had crystallized within the national imagination as an immediate and almost instinctive fantasy of deliverance for those trapped by poverty and harsh environments. Imaginatively, California emerges as a space of perpetual sunshine where, even in winter, the trees bear fruit and nature itself seems to ease human hardship. It is this idea that indirectly surfaces when Maria, as she is once again asking for credit while awaiting the end of the snowbound season, catches sight of strawberries in Mr. Craik's shop and immediately thinks of California: "'Strawberries!' she said. 'And in winter, too! Are they California strawberries, Mr. Craik?'" (80).¹¹ Although this imaginative escape already surfaces, albeit implicitly, in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, it is in *1933 Was a Bad Year* that it takes full shape, crystallizing into a perspicuous and pivotal motif. Here, California is no longer merely a fleeting fantasy of a warmer landscape, but emerges as a dreamlike, idyllic dimension symbolizing Dominic's sporting ambition. "Dreamers, we were a house full of dreamers" (Fante 1985a: 36), observes the young protagonist, who, together with his wealthy friend Kenny Parrish, fantasizes about Catalina, envisioning it as a tropical island where a life of freedom and prosperity would await them, if only they could escape the freezing and deathly grip of Colorado.

"Catalina!" Ken gasped. "Palm trees along the blue Pacific! Blue skies bathed in sunlight, warm tropic nights! No snow! A little island paradise where all you do is play baseball and eat good food in a fine hotel!"

"I'm listening."

"Think of it! And here we are, down in this ratty old basement, buried alive in a snowstorm. My God, Dominic! Catalina's just over the mountains, a measly fifteen hundred miles away

It burst out of me: "Let's go, Kenny! Let's get the hell out of here before we die!" (61)

This exchange not only captures the idealistic dreams of two young boys united by their passion for baseball, but it also epitomizes a collective weariness and disillusionment with Colorado's sublime, inhospitable landscape. Kenny's eager outcry – "No snow!" – gives voice to the collective yearning for California's

¹¹ This scene appears in chapter four of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*. The whole chapter, with slight variations, was later published as a short story with the title "Charge It" in the posthumous collection *The Big Hunger* (2000).

climate, marketed, as Carey McWilliams observes, with promises of “no snow nor ice nor sleet” (McWilliams 1946 [1973: 103]).

With its revitalizing fruits and therapeutic climate, California emerges for Fante’s characters as the inevitable destination in their attempt to escape the seasonal and familial constraints of Colorado’s sublime landscape. As Fante’s Californian works reveal, however, the promises of revitalization and prosperity envisioned by his characters in the “books of youth” ultimately prove to be illusory; the once-imagined idyllic nature and its sweet fruits turn instead into something noxious and corrupted, within a Los Angeles that, far from embodying a natural paradise, appears instead as “a sad flower in the sand” (Fante 1939 [2002: 13]). Yet such darker reflections remain distant from the tone of the two novels analyzed in this paper, where California still appears as an idyllic dimension of promise and expectation juxtaposed with the fierce and sublime seasonal constraints of Colorado.

REFERENCES

Barattin, A.

2021 “La Los Angeles di Arturo. Spazi reali e spazi immaginari nel romanzo *Chiedi alla polvere* di John Fante”, *Kabul Magazine*, www.kabulmagazine.com/la-los-angeles-di-arturo/, accessed April 2025.

Béranger, J.E.

1994 “Italian American Identity: The Masks of Religious Difference in the Novels of John Fante and Pietro Di Donato”, *The Columbus People* 11(3), 58-78.

Bloom, H.

1976 *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Bordin, E.

2019 *Un’etnicità complessa. Negoiazioni identitarie nelle opere di John Fante*. Napoli: La Scuola di Pitagora.

Buonomo, L.

2003 “The Italian American Man’s Burden: Masculinity in John Fante and Jerre Mangione”. In: L. Buonomo, *From Pioneer to Nomad: Essays on Italian North American Writing*. Toronto: Guernica, 61-73.

Burke, E.

1823 *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. London: Thomas McLean.

Collins, R.

1994 “Stealing Home: John Fante and the Moral Dimension of Baseball”, *Aethlon* 12(1), 81-91.

- 2000 *John Fante: A Literary Portrait*. Toronto: Guernica.
- D'Alfonso, F.
 2012 "'Quel ragazzo è cittadino americano, non uno straniero.' Processi di integrazione culturale e lavoro nella società americana: John Fante e la 'primavera' di Bandini", *Itinerari. Quaderni di studi di etica e di politica* 2, 135-144.
- D'Angelo, P.
 1924 *Son of Italy*. New York: Macmillan.
- Davis, M.
 2006 *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. New York: Verso.
- De Lucia, F.
 2007 "Making America: The Narrative Aesthetics of the Early Italian American Novel", *SPELL* 20, 145-160.
- Emerson, R.W.
 1836 *Nature*. Boston: James Munroe and Company.
- Fante, J.
 1938 *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*. New York: Stackpole Sons. [Repr. 1983] Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow.
 1939 *Ask the Dust*. New York: Stackpole Sons. [Repr. 2002] New York: Ecco.
 1940 *Dago Red*. New York: Viking Press.
 1982 *Dreams from Bunker Hill*. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow.
 1985a *1933 Was a Bad Year*. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow.
 1985b *The Road to Los Angeles*. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow.
 1991 *Selected Letters, 1932-1981*. Edited by S. Cooney. New York: HarperCollins.
 2000 *The Big Hunger: Stories 1932-1959*. Edited by Stephen Cooper. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow.
- Gardaphé, F.L.
 1999 "John Fante's American Fantasia". In: S. Cooper and D. Fine (eds.) *John Fante: A Critical Gathering*. Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 42-53.
 2004 "Left Out: Three Italian American Writers of the 1930s". In: F.L. Gardaphé, *Leaving Little Italy: Essaying Italian American Culture*. New York: State University of New York Press, 53-66.
- Hawthorn, R.
 2018 "Delinquent Dogs and the Molise Malaise: Negotiating Suburbia in John Fante's *My Dog Stupid*", *Journal of American Studies* 52(3), 766-786.
- Jameson, F.
 1992 *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London and New York: Verso.
- Kant, I.
 1764 *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*. [Repr. 2011] Edited by P. Frierson and P. Guyer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kolodny, A.

1975 *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Kordich, C.J.

2000 *John Fante: His Novels and Novellas*. New York: Twayne.

Kronick, J.

1986 "On the Border of History: Whitman and the American sublime". In: M. Arensberg (ed.) *The American Sublime*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 51-82.

Laurila, M.

1999 "The Los Angeles Booster Myth, the Anti-Myth and John Fante's Ask the Dust". In: S. Cooper and D. Fine (eds.) *John Fante: A Critical Gathering*. Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 112-121.

Livorni, E.

1998 "John Fante e la saga di Arturo Bandini". In: AA.VV. *John Fante scrittore e sceneggiatore*. Pescara: Ediards, 47-60.

Mariani, E.

2018 "John Fante e la poetica del fallimento. Conflitti etnici e generazionali nella Los Angeles suburbana di *My Dog Stupid*". *América Crítica* 2(2), 123-136.

Marinaccio, R.

2009 "'Tea and cookies, diavolo!' Italian American masculinity in John Fante's *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*". *MELUS* 34(3), 43-69.

Marx, L.

1964 *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. New York: Oxford University Press. [Repr. 1967] New York: Oxford University Press.

Mattevi, Y.

2009 "The Face that is Fit: Ethnic Self-Destruction in John Fante's *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*". In: E. Bellina et al. (eds.) *About Face: Depicting the Self in the Written and Visual Arts*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 177-193.

McWilliams, C.

1946 *Southern California: An Island on the Land*. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce. [Repr. 1973] Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith.

Mondillo, M.

2020 "Dry Soul e Dry Soil in Erskine Caldwell: Amoralità e fiducia nella Provvidenza nei deserti di sabbia della *Tobacco Road*". In: G. Nori and M. Vallone (eds.) *Deserto e spiritualità nella letteratura americana*. Città di Castello: I Libri di Emil, 109-131.

Nixon, R.

2011 *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.

Onions, C.T. (ed.)

1966 *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Pease, D.

1986 "Sublime Politics". In: M. Arensberg (ed.) *The American Sublime*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 21-50.

Ryan, M.

2004 "At Home in America: John Fante and the Imaginative American Self", *Studies in American Fiction* 32(2), 185-212.

Smith, H.N.

1950 *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. [Repr. 1978] Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Stevens, W.

1935 "The American Sublime". In: *Ideas of Order*. New York: The Alcestis Press. [Repr. 1971] In: *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Knopf, 130.

Thoreau, H.D.

1862 "Walking", *The Atlantic Monthly, A Magazine of Literature, Art, and Politics* 9(56), 657-674.

Westling, L.

2013 "Introduction". In: L. Westling (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-14.

Wilson, R.

1991 *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

ANDREA ACQUALAGNA

Università degli Studi di Bergamo

andrea.acqualagna@unibg.it

ORCID code: 0009-0000-2469-2804