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## **"Against My Destiny": Reading an Italian Immigrant's Memoir in the Early 20th-century South**

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“Against My Destiny”: Reading an Italian Immigrant’s Memoir in the Early 20th-century South

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
English

by

Bethany Santucci

B.A. Millsaps College, 2006

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## Abstract

Giuseppe Emilio Rocconi's life narrative, *The Story of My Life* (1958), represents the hardships of immigration and assimilation through meditations on home, family, and religion. I read his narrative in contrast with white elite narratives that express nostalgia for sharecropping and the segregation era. I see his narrative as a reflection upon the costs of integrating into the white patriarchal economy and his sense of being neither fully Italian nor fully American.

Life narrative, segregation, race, class, gender, New South, doubleness, identity, Italian, immigrant, isolation, Catholicism, sharecropping

## Introduction

Recalling his decision to immigrate to the United States in 1906, Giuseppe Emilio Rocconi writes, “Sometimes I feel that I went against my destiny” (32). Like the millions of immigrants that left behind their native countries, families, and way of life to find better opportunities in the New World, Rocconi felt that his immigration to the United States altered what he imagined to be the natural course of his life, rewriting his life story.<sup>1</sup> Thirty-four years later, Rocconi began to write *The Story of My Life* (1958), the autobiographical narrative in which he describes his early life in Italy, his immigration to the United States, and his work as a sharecropper and later a landowning farmer in the Mississippi Delta.

Perhaps in writing his own story, Rocconi overlooked the fact that while America changed his destiny, his presence in America altered the country as well. According to Werner Sollors in *Ethnic Modernism*, immigrants, especially immigrant writers, played a significant political role in shaping the United States between 1910 and 1950. Noting that the United States was not yet “reimagined as the ‘nation of nations’” (13), Sollors writes, “The cultural work of recasting the United States as a multiethnic country was undertaken by American ethnic writers in the period” (13). As an American ethnic writer, Rocconi contributes to what Sollors terms “a multiethnic country” by providing a unique perspective that challenges and resists assimilation to a homogenizing American identity and mythology. Consequently, Rocconi’s narrative writes two

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<sup>1</sup> According to Werner Sollors’s *Ethnic Modernism*, “Immigration had reached impressive proportions: More than thirteen million of those counted in 1910 were foreign-born, mostly in Europe; the number increases to over thirty-two million if one includes the second-generation children of foreign-born Americans that the Census then counted under the category ‘total foreign white stock.’ Two and a half million had come from Germany, more than a million and a half from Russia, and more than a million each from Ireland, Italy, Austria, Scandinavia, and Great Britain. The majority of the newcomers were arriving during the ‘new immigration,’ the wave that peaked between the 1880s and the 1920s” (38).

stories, that of the experiences that shaped his identity and that of a national identity shaped by immigrants.

*The Story of My Life* illustrates the influence of the American South's cultural geography during the early twentieth-century New South—both in terms of the region's anxieties and its conflicted sense of identity—on his identification as an Italian American.<sup>2</sup> Like other immigrant self-writing of the period, his narrative depicts the struggling immigrant's attempt to achieve the American Dream; yet, unlike most immigrant stories, his narrative does not conclude with an ideal portrait of himself achieving financial success or American citizenship.<sup>3</sup> Rather, Rocconi's *The Story of My Life* is framed by the paradoxical cultural and economic structures of the New South—that is, its rejection of, and yet, longing for, industrialization, urbanization, and multiculturalism and its insistence upon adhering to and enforcing segregation; the resulting narrative depicts his life story as one that, like the New South, is idealistic and flawed. Through themes and various constructions of self, his narrative illustrates the relationship between the conflicted identity of an Italian American and the contradictory nature of the region in which he settled.

Rocconi's immigrant experience is representative of the white upper class's vision to supplement the diminishing black working class with immigrants who were encouraged to work on plantations, further stratifying labor politics. White ethnic workers like Rocconi comprised another race/class status that was neither black nor white, and that was forced to work under the same conditions as black laborers, while also being encouraged to aspire to "whiteness."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I am defining cultural geography as the study of the economic, racial, and political dynamics and discourses used among a people living in a specific region and time period; in this case, the Mississippi Delta between 1910-1950.

<sup>3</sup> According to Werner Sollors, "ethnic authors tended to flash their accomplishments, identifying their achievement and upward mobility with the respective ethnic group as a whole and with America, instead of revealing their individual perversions, nightmares, fears, or human failings" (*Ethnic Modernism* 44).

<sup>4</sup> According to John M. Barry's *Rising Tide*, Leroy Percy began looking for white labor to supplement the diminishing black labor force in the Mississippi Delta. He refused to recruit "the poor whites from small farms in

Rocconi's narrative supplements, and at times, contradicts two regional texts' visions of the same era—William Alexander Percy's autobiography, *Lanterns on the Levee*, and David L. Cohn's memoir, *The Mississippi Delta and the World*, with his descriptions of sharecropping and farming, race and class dynamics, and immigrant communities in this region. Whereas Percy and Cohn often offer nostalgia for the agrarian South, and aggrandized, romantic, and racially or economically-biased versions of its traditions and culture, Rocconi's straightforward, first-hand account details his experience, leaving out the cavalier notions of gentlemanly planters, and focusing, rather, on the reality of living in a region defined by segregation and white paternalism. In *The Burden of Southern History*, C. Vann Woodward explains that while the Agrarians longed for the Old South, the new generation moved toward industrialization; and while the rest of the United States came to be defined in terms of fraught diversity, the South clung to what Professor Ulrich B. Phillips termed its identity as a "white man's country" (Woodward 9-10). Immigrants like Rocconi who were in search of the American way of life did not necessarily find it in the South, because they had settled in a place where they were not initially granted access to white privilege and where conditions required for fully achieving the American Dream did not exist.

Thus, Rocconi depicts a close-knit Italian community that maintains traditions, remains isolated and homogenous, and resists assimilation. Rocconi shows Italians relying on other Italians (rather than the larger community) for advice, job opportunities and support during difficult times. Despite this resistance, the Italian community he describes strives for financial progress and success, and as they begin to gain footing in their new country, their children, second generation Italian-Americans, assimilate. Ultimately, this leaves Rocconi more isolated

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Alabama or Georgia" (108) because "he considered them inferior to blacks, and he believed their presence would exacerbate rather than ease any racial tension" (108). Therefore, he recruited Italian immigrants—"cheap, good, white labor" (109). Percy believed that if the Italian immigrants solved the labor shortage, then his goal of industrializing plantations would succeed and solve the "Negro problem" (110).



by the people and world around him, implying the cost of homogenization and assimilation to regional norms of “whiteness.”

In order to fully consider Rocconi’s complex and paradoxical sense of self, I will be discussing themes from his manuscript such as family, religion, and authorship. I argue that in presenting each of these themes, he depicts himself as both an ideal—devoted to his family, God, and his art—and as an individual tormented by his detachment from his Italian family, his ambivalence about God, and his role as a writer. While I will not aim to define Rocconi’s unstated intentions or opinions concerning these themes, I do read his narrative as produced in the context of cultural and social norms, as well as fictional immigrant narratives of the day. While he does not explicitly address the system of segregation or the writing of other Italian immigrants, for example, I believe a full reading of his text must account for those structuring absences. Furthermore, I see Rocconi as a character in his work and view his portrayal of himself as performative, especially in relation to traditional gender roles and religious devotion. In addition, I posit that his sense of doubleness as an Italian American may be inferred in passages devoted to modes of assimilation and inclusion, such as military conscription and English-language acquisition. In these kinds of moments, we might see Rocconi as an example of an immigrant who has to come to terms with no longer considering himself Italian or American, but as both.

Comparing Rocconi’s *The Story of My Life* to other immigrant self-writing from the period highlights the complexity and contradictory nature of his subjectivity. For example, unlike Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land*, a 1912 immigration narrative that tells the story of her escape from the religious, educational, and economic oppression to freedom in the United States, Rocconi’s narrative is not a “rebirth” story; rather, Rocconi fosters his Italian heritage and

traditions, remaining in a small, secluded community of Italians. As mentioned earlier, he does not simply tell an upward mobility story. While he does show financial success, he also tells stories similar in tone and theme to Pietro di Donato's novel about Sicilian immigrants in New York City, *Christ in Concrete*, and Anzia Yezierska's short stories about Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Like these autobiographical fiction writers, Rocconi depicts the bitter irony that immigrants faced when, after they had literally built America, as bricklayers, landclearers and sharecroppers, America did not seem to reward them, but rather turned a cold shoulder. By looking at Rocconi's life narrative in comparison to others', it seems as if he tells a similar story, only he does so in a way that illustrates both the rise to the American Dream and the descent into loneliness and abandonment.

In a sense, Rocconi's loneliness and his inability to feel a sense of accomplishment and self-worth could be linked to the South's conflicted identity as a region. Like Paul at the end of *Christ in Concrete*, it seems as if the region that the Italian community built up is moving on, leaving the ones who worked it into existence destitute, faithless, and alone. Perhaps Rocconi, like di Donato, is pointing out the progressive nature of the United States that takes place at the expense of the immigrant communities that helped to make it happen, and thus, the story of Rocconi's life that he feared would forever be altered by America, is, in fact, changed forever by its influence.

In 1940, Rocconi spoke very little English and could write even less, but he was determined to write his story, even if it meant his children, who could not read or write the Italian language, would have to translate the narrative in order to read it. He began writing on January 14, 1940, when he "didn't have much to do, when it was cold and the snow was on the fields" (1). When he completed it between 1956 and 1957, he added a request to his will that it

be translated into English for his descendants. Rocconi died on October 29, 1957, and in 1961, a translator living in New York named Peter Mattia was paid \$266.67 to translate the manuscript. Four copies of *The Story of My Life* were divided among Rocconi's children, who then made more copies for themselves and their children. The text copy upon which this work is based was given to me by my grandmother Ida (Edith) Rocconi Santucci. I have been unable to locate the original manuscript written in Rocconi's handwriting, and as a result, I have based this research on Mattia's translation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> While I acknowledge that using the translation instead of the original document does hinder my analysis in some ways, I believe that Rocconi's manuscript in its current state is an accurate translation and that it provides a wealth of information to our understanding of immigrant self-writing and the American South as a region.

## Segregation and Social Isolation

Because Rocconi wrote *The Story of My Life* from 1940 to 1957, his narrative provides an immigrant's perspective on race and class dynamics at the height of segregation in the American South. Rocconi's South did not offer all of the social interactions that urban areas provided. For example, in other immigrant writing, immigrants are depicted as having commonly interacted with immigrants from other countries and African Americans. In *Christ in Concrete*, Annunziata goes to see a "Negress medium" (146) and Paul befriends a Jewish boy. However, based on Rocconi's manuscript interaction with individuals outside of the Italian community was limited. For instance, he mentions working for wealthy white landowners and seeking out white doctors. He describes a Sicilian who refuses to help him call for a doctor, and that once a "colored man" helped him when he had a sunstroke (115). Other than these brief encounters with individuals from various backgrounds, Rocconi's narrative suggests that he remained isolated to the group of Italian immigrants.

Unlike Rocconi's narrative, William Alexander Percy's *Lanterns on the Levee* and David L. Cohn's *The Mississippi Delta and the World* speak from a position of privilege, representing the white upper-class that reinforced race and class boundaries. They further the notion of isolationism and the lack of tolerance and understanding between races and classes in the Mississippi Delta. Percy, for instance, describes the

basic fiber . . . of the Delta population—as of the whole South—is  
built of three dissimilar threads and only three. First were the old  
slave-holders, the landed gentry, the governing class . . . they have

their descendants, whose evaluation of life approximates theirs.

Second were the poor whites, who owned no slaves, whose manual labor lost its dignity from being in competition with slave labor, who worked their small unproductive holdings ignored by the gentry, despised by the slaves. Third were the Negroes. (19)

It is worthy to note that Percy describes these groups as “dissimilar threads” (19). Like other segregation-era texts, Percy’s narrative is contradictory. While he shows examples of intimacy between upper-class whites and domestic workers, he disavows the potential for intimacy between these groups, reinstating race and class divisions. I would argue that these distinct categories were probably viewed by Rocconi in the same way. Segregation, in many ways, prohibited interaction between persons of different races, and naturalist ideologies, which taught that environment and class status determined one’s moral judgment and fate, drew a dividing line between the socially elite and minorities. For Rocconi, identification and exchange with persons of different races and classes would have been limited by these social proscriptions.

Cohn, whose reflections on living in Greenville, Mississippi, are highly romanticized, sustains Percy’s distinctions about race and class segregation when he writes: “we were bound in a relationship of enforced intimacy. One was sure to pass those whom one loved or despised...Out in Newtown, where a large part of our Negro population lived, breakfast came early for those who walked long distances to work” (17). Cohn’s statement points out one of the paradoxes of southern segregation; though it was enforced, total segregation was impossible given wealthy whites’ reliance on blacks, poor whites, and immigrants. For Cohn, even in a town where everyone “knew” each other, no one truly knew one another because race and class segregated individuals, creating a policed intimacy, safety in distance from difference. However,

for blacks, poor whites, and immigrants, this paradox created injustice and a feeling of resentment for wealthy whites who only valued them for their services.

Similarly, Cohn describes Italian immigrants in Greenville as if they are an exotic mystery, further distancing himself from the culture and social sphere of the immigrant group. He writes about hearing as a small boy about an Italian artist who came “from a faraway place called Italy. It was a strange land. Many of its men were ‘artists’; probably because they were foreigners and knew no better” (8). He goes on to say that the Italians “quickly became Americanized. Abandoning the follies of their homeland and adopting the wisdom of ours, they became cobblers, peddlers, merchants, keepers of restaurants” (8). Cohn’s description of Italians here is not only inaccurate, but condescending. He assumes that all Italians adopted the American way of life, when Rocconi’s manuscript proves otherwise. Cohn also assumes that the American way of life was better than the Italians’, calling their traditions and cultures, “follies” (8). Here, Cohn illustrates just how far removed the white middle/-upper class was from the realities of immigrant life and culture, and he shows the distance at which the immigrant classes were kept from white society by making false assumptions about them.

In addition, though Leroy Percy, William’s father, attempted to keep the Ku Klux Klan from entering the Mississippi Delta, their presence and message of hatred of African Americans, Catholics, and Jews were made known in 1922. According to John Barry in *Rising Tide*, “the Klan preached hatred of Catholics, blacks, foreigners, and Jews. The world, the Klan said, was falling apart, but a crusading Klan would put things right” (142). Percy notes the strong presence of the Klan in the Mississippi Delta for the next two years. He writes,

our town was disintegrated by a bloodless, cruel warfare, more  
bitter and unforgiving than anything I encountered at the front . . .

The Klan did not stand for, but against. It stood against Catholics, Jews, Negroes, Foreigners, and sin. In our town it chose Catholics as the object of its chief persecution. Catholic employees were fired, Catholic businessmen were boycotted, Catholic office-holders opposed. (234)

Barry notes that William Percy's mother, Camille, was Catholic (144), so the Klan's mistreatment of Catholics was not tolerated by the Percys. The racial and religious segregation and violence imposed by the Klan instilled fear in African Americans, Jews, and Catholics, like Rocconi. Though Rocconi does not write about the Klan, it can be assumed that he had knowledge of their presence, and he, like others targeted by the Klan, saw the Klan as yet another source of social division and exclusion. Rocconi's religious beliefs and his ability to interact in the community would have been threatened by the Klan, and this provides context for his identity crisis as well as social isolation.

Finally, the most vivid example of the distance between social classes and races comes from both Cohn's and Percy's romantic, nostalgic notions of the South's agrarian economic history. Cohn writes that everyone in the Mississippi Delta looked forward to the cotton harvest as if cotton were a religion. He writes: "we cheerfully endured our acute discomfort [caused by the heat of the summer]. For hot weather, day and night, is good for cotton...Negro household servants anticipated their annual cotton-picking expeditions to the fields" (65). I find Cohn's depiction of cotton harvesting season somewhat skewed. While I am sure that because cotton was the major source of income in the South, Southerners anticipated the harvest, I find it difficult to accept that "Negro household servants anticipated" (65) cotton picking. At the very least, he does not acknowledge the dire financial conditions which led African Americans to

depend so heavily on good cotton harvest and yet to remain perpetually in debt. Again, Cohn's notions of the mindset of the various groups of people in this region seems misinformed and distorted, most likely because he had very little interaction with social groups outside his own (and had much to gain in retaining his privileged stance).

Percy, similarly, longs for a return to the sharecropping system, which his father, Leroy Percy, believed in:

Sharecropping is one of the best systems ever devised to give security and a chance for profit to the simple and the unskilled. It has but one drawback—it must be administered by human beings to whom it offers an unusual opportunity to rob without detection or punishment. The failure is not the system itself, but in not living up to the contractual obligations of the system—the failure is in human nature. (282)

Here, again, a white upper-class man takes a skewed approach and gives praise to a system that brought the working class hardships and death. Ironically, one of the human beings who fails the sharecropping system is Percy's father, Leroy, whose actions were exploitative enough to bring about peonage charges at Sunnyside Plantation.<sup>6</sup> According to Bertram Wyatt-Brown in *Shadows Over Sunnyside*, Leroy Percy wrote a letter to James Watkins in New York City in defense of sharecropping. He wrote, "Some of the Italians working no more than 40 acres of land have saved up to the last eight or nine years, as much as \$15,000.00 in cash" (79), but Mary Quackenbos, investigator for the United States Attorney General, "reported that the firm

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<sup>6</sup> According to Bertram Wyatt-Brown in "Leroy Percy and Sunnyside: Planter Mentality and Italian Peonage in the Mississippi Delta," "by 1907, Percy had managed to settle about 158 families on the [Sunnyside] plantation" (78). But as immigrants began writing home about the deplorable conditions at Sunnyside Plantation, a representative from the United States Attorney General's Office, Mary Quackenbos, was sent to investigate and brought charges of peonage against Percy and his partners, O.B. Crittendon and Morris Rosenstock.



[Sunnyside Plantation] in 1907 had a gross income of \$120,950, and, deducting \$34,000 to tenants, made a return of \$86,950, a sum indecently large. The revenue was chiefly garnered from the acreage rented” (80).<sup>7</sup> Ironically, not only does William Percy praise his father’s sharecropping system, but he also thinks that the economy of the South would improve if they were to return to that way of life. Perhaps William Percy was disillusioned by his father’s means of conducting his business, but as Quackenbos’s report points out, less than half of the Italians made less than \$400 per year at Sunnyside, an amount that outrageously contradicts his father’s reassuring portrait of sharecropping (Bertram 80). The exploitation created by white upper-class paternalism and the segregation hierarchy in this region is so profound that no human relationship is viewed clearly and without bias. Without a doubt, the resistance to change and the fear of losing its reputation as an agricultural region is prevalent in the works of both Cohn and Percy, and unfortunately, that resistance to change continued to isolate and segregate the marginalized of the South for decades.

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<sup>7</sup> “Other profits,” according to Bertram’s summation of Quackenbos’s report, “came from commissary sales, with exorbitantly high prices for goods, as well as from rental and sale of mules, from a rebate of approximately 20 percent from the physician’s fee, and from ginning, freightage of cotton, baling, and resale of seeds. Her conclusion was: ‘All this, to my mind foretells an enormous profit for the company, and a heavy burden for the laborer to carry’” (80).

## Italian-American Doubleness

Rocconi states that he wrote *The Story of My Life* “the way it happened” (1); he assures the reader that it is “a humble work, just a record for myself, until I depart from this world, then for my children and their offspring, that knew only a little of my origin, where I was born, my childhood, all that had happened to me, in the other part of the world from which I emigrated” (1). Though Rocconi claims these intentions, his narrative as a whole suggests that his purpose and audience are more complicated than he is willing to admit. Rather, the formal elements of the narrative as well as his shifts in narrative voice and audience show that Rocconi’s manuscript may be read as revealing of the conflicted nature of an immigrant in the U.S. South.

*The Story of My Life* is a hybrid text,<sup>8</sup> and its formal elements compliment the anti-progress narrative that he writes. Sollors writes in *Beyond Ethnicity* that “ethnic writers have an acute sense of doubleness” (249). We might see Rocconi’s sense of doubleness, or his sense of being both Italian and American, as largely contributing to his feelings of abandonment, separation, and isolation. While Rocconi wants to cling to Italian traditions and culture, he also wants to achieve financial stability, to own property, and to not be employed by anyone. Though he never states that he strives for “whiteness” or homogeneity, we might infer his desire to survive in the Delta and his belief that the only way to do so is to be in a position of power. Paradoxically, the New South offered and encouraged white ethnic immigrants to aspire to “whiteness,” and yet, forced them to live and work under the same conditions as the African-American and white working class. In the segregated South, his model for power would have

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<sup>8</sup> I am defining hybrid text as simply a combination of forms. Rocconi combines linear narrative and daily diary entries in *The Story of My Life*.

been white upper-class plantation owners like Percy. Therefore, Rocconi's sense of double identity is directly tied to his struggle for power. By becoming a property owner, he separates himself from the working class; however, he realizes that the cost of doing so is to become a member of the "white" plantation-owning patriarchy and perhaps foregoing his Italian identity. Thus, we might see Rocconi's narrative as a reflection on his position in the New South's class system in which he no longer sees himself as fully Italian or fully American.

Unlike Mary Antin, who wanted to fully embrace the American way of life, Rocconi never intended to stay in America. His plan was to become wealthy and then return to Italy:

Naïve of the situation in America, we dreamed that it was very easy for several of us to find fortune. We thought we could become rich in a few years, so much so that we had the courage to say to our relatives and friends, "I'll see you again . . ." rather than farewell. We would say: "Oh . . . we'll be there three or four years, then we'll come back in a short time we will make a lot of money . . ." We were naïve . . . we didn't know better. We had faith, but we did not have luck. (35)

Perhaps once Rocconi realized that his immigration to America would be permanent, he applied for citizenship, but clearly, he never intended to stay, nor to become Americanized, as Mary Antin does. I want to suggest that Rocconi's resistance to assimilate, or as Werner Sollors says, to "consent" to the American way of life, contributed to his and many other immigrants' sense of loneliness and isolation in America.<sup>9</sup> For instance, even though Rocconi becomes an American

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<sup>9</sup> In *Beyond Ethnicity*, Sollors defines the terms "consent" and "descent": "Consent and descent are terms which allow me to approach and question the whole maze of American ethnicity and culture...Descent relations are those defined by anthropologists as relations of 'substance' (by blood or nature); consent relations describe those of 'law' or 'marriage.' Descent language emphasizes our positions as heirs, our hereditary qualities, liabilities, and

citizen in 1928, in his 1949 story “A Mishap in the Family of My Brother Pietro,” in which several men are killed by an explosion of dynamite in a barn, he calls the white men “Americans,” “because I don’t know their names” (74) and the other men “Italians,” though they probably had become U.S. citizens by that time. With this brief comment, he makes a distinction between Italian Americans and Americans. Presumably, even twenty years after becoming a citizen, he still considers himself Italian and not an Italian American because he does not consider himself part of a collective understanding of being an American.

Similarly, Rocconi rarely interacts with other members of the larger social community, and instead, describes his relationships with members of the Italian-American community as being essential for survival in America. From his very beginnings in the U.S., he surrounded himself with a close-knit Italian community, which was necessary for survival at Red Leaf Plantation, a place plagued with “a big epidemic of marsh-fever. Too many woods and marsh lands, with mosquitoes and flies” (53). However, these were not the only problems under which Italians suffered on the plantation.

He settled with twenty-five other Italian families at Red Leaf Plantation, while another one hundred and fifty Italian families settled at nearby Sunnyside Plantation. According to Rocconi, the Italians settled in this area because “the land was our main occupation as it had also been that of our forefathers in Italy, and here too, where we had transferred, there was no other alternative but the land” (53). However, this might not have been precisely the case. At the time of Rocconi’s arrival, Leroy Percy, O.B. Crittendon, and Morris Rosenstock were carrying out a plan that had been initiated by Austin Corbin, the previous controller of Sunnyside Plantation

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entitlements; consent language stresses our abilities as mature free agents and ‘architects of our fates’ to choose our spouses, our destinies, and our political systems” (6). I am using Sollors’s term here to argue that Rocconi does not consent to become American, and as a result, he isolates himself within the Italian-American community and does not become a fully participating member of American society.

Company, called “the immigrant experiment” (Boehm 49). To tackle the labor shortage in the Mississippi Delta, Corbin negotiated “with an Italian immigrant agency in New York and with Italian diplomats” (Gatewood 18) to bring Northern and Central Italians to work for the Sunnyside Company. Though Rocconi does not write that he was encouraged by the Italian Immigration Agency to immigrate to the United States, it is possible that his brother had been persuaded by the “experiment” initially and that Rocconi followed after him. After Corbin’s death, Percy, Crittendon, and Rosenstock continued to carry out his plan, but conditions on the plantation were deplorable and the Italians were being cheated out of their wages.<sup>10</sup>

The Italians at Red Leaf and Sunnyside depended on one another for financial and moral support. Without any other trade experience and no knowledge of other opportunities in the United States, they found themselves bound to the land. On top of that, Rocconi describes suffering under the Sunnyside Company’s discriminatory financial practices:

The employer at that time took everything from us. All our needs were purchased on credit from them, for the simple reason we didn’t have any money, besides the city was so far and there weren’t today’s conveniences to go there. Whatever we bought was on credit, to be paid with the next crop to come. Of course, it was more expensive, plus we had to pay 25 % interest. When it

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<sup>10</sup> According to John M. Barry in *Rising Tide*, “Of 8 million people entering the United States from foreign countries between 1892 and 1906, only 2,697 claimed Mississippi as their destination. Most were Italians brought over for Percy’s experiment. There would be few more” (121). In *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, James Cobb describes Leroy Percy as being initially pleased with his Italian experiment. The Italian farmers who had been accustomed to “mezzadria” were hard workers, and they replaced fleeing black labor force that he was “by no means satisfied with” (Cobb 109). Cobb quotes Percy as saying that the Italians are ‘industrious, peaceable and thrifty’ as well as ‘healthy, hearty and virtuous, there never having been a bastard born on the property’” (Cobb 110). Cobb continues, “In 1905 approximately five hundred Italians had cleared an aggregate sum of approximately forty-six thousand dollars” (Cobb 110). The Italians were making Percy and the O.B. Crittenden Company wealthy, but the Italians never saw the owners’ appreciation. Percy did not allow the Italians to handle the sales of their own crops. “He noted their inexperience in such matters as well as the loss of work attendant in their coming to Greenville to negotiate the sale. Most important, however, Percy noted. . . ‘They are industrious, but no more honest than the negro, and much more enterprising’” (Cobb 110).

was time to sell the cotton they would buy it at very low price, in that way they made a profit twice, at our expenses, because we couldn't sell the cotton out until our debt was repaid. The things being that way, we needed more cotton and consequently more work, to break even. (58)

According to Randolph H. Boehm, Mary B. Quackenbos, an investigator for the Department of Justice, was sent to the Mississippi Delta in 1907, Rocconi's first year on the plantation, to investigate "cases involving immigrant laborers held in peonage in southern states" (49).

Initially, her findings showed just what Rocconi describes:

widespread violations of the alien contract labor law, monopoly business practices by the company in buying and marketing tenants' cotton, price gouging on food and farm implements, substandard living conditions, serious health problems, profiteering on advances for medical care and medicines, and a pervasive atmosphere of intimidation fostered by the walking bosses. (57)

But, later, despite Crittendon and Percy's attempts to cover up the mistreatment of the Italians, Quackenbos was informed that "two peons and their families were roughly evicted from the plantation. They were cast upon the levee at night, where they remained without shelter with an infant until the launch arrived the next morning" (Boehm 61). Quackenbos "drew a petition to indict O.B. Crittenden himself for peonage" (61); but with Leroy Percy's powerful political connections, he had Quackenbos removed from the case, her reports stashed away, and the charges against Crittendon dropped (Barry 116-120).

Burdened by the debts owed to the Sunnyside Company, mistrust of the company owners, and fear for the way that they would be treated if they rebelled, the Italian community banded together. The accusations of peonage, investigated by Quackenbos, also explain why Italians were afraid to leave the company. In a sense, they were financially enslaved to the company because they could see no other way out of their debts, which compounded in a vicious cycle. Rocconi relies on the help of his brother, other Italians, and his wife, who he says he shared “a life full of disturbances, of misery, work and pain” (56) in order to survive while living and working in deplorable conditions at Red Leaf Plantation.

During the flood in 1912, almost all of the Italian families at Red Leaf Plantation dispersed and moved to cities such as Chicago and Memphis. When Rocconi finds himself virtually alone on the plantation, he and his brother Pietro “decided also to leave” (61). From there, he moves to Ensley, Alabama, joining another group of Italian immigrants in that area. He “liked that place [because] it promised me a little of my country. Those rolling fields, the pure healthy air, it had really captivated me” (64). When Rocconi describes Ensley as “my country,” one must wonder if he is referring to America or to Italy. Did it remind him of what he had left behind in Italy? Or, was it more like what he had expected his experience as a farmer in America to have been like? Either way, Rocconi seems to be most comfortable in this area because he was not bound by a plantation company’s harsh treatment.

When he returns to Mississippi, he continues to move from place to place, always settling in Italian communities. He settles in Holly Ridge, Mississippi, where another Italian named Nazzareno Spaccarelli said that “there was a lot of cotton to be picked and a house were [sic] also available” (64). And, later, following the recommendation of J.A. Crawford, he moves to another Italian community “all were from Le Marche, good folks ready to help one another”

(67). Based on this description of Crawford's recommendation, it seems as if in some ways, the white landowners played a role in keeping the Italian community isolated as well. In this case, Crawford assumes that Rocconi feels most comfortable living in an Italian community, and perhaps Crawford recommends that he settle with them, not because Rocconi will feel at home there, but rather, so that he can keep the uneducated, non-English speaking Italians together. Obviously, keeping the Italian community together meant that they were largely in the dark about how badly they were being cheated out of their money, and by keeping their debts high and their resources low, landowners like Crawford could make the most profit. Here again, Rocconi illustrates the effects of race and class segregation in the South; one reason for segregation at this time was to prevent class solidarity across racial lines. The ignorance and isolation that landowners like Crawford encourage prevented white ethnic immigrants and African Americans from interacting socially and achieving financially.<sup>11</sup>

Rocconi, however, does see that he is being cheated, and he resolves "not to be robbed anymore" (69). He, along with, again, two other Italian families, the Bastaris and the Canonics, leases a sixteenth section of land from Mr. Bishop, which helps him become more financially stable, and later buys his own land from Mr. Smith in Cleveland, Mississippi. Until Rocconi begins to become financially stable, he remains within the Italian sharecropping communities, but when he resolves to "not be robbed anymore" (69), he gradually distances himself from the larger, poverty-stricken Italian community. However, Rocconi does not distance himself from the Italian community entirely, as he continues to work with them, occasionally mentioning moments in which he interacted with them. By and large, though, the only community that Rocconi describes in any detail is the Italian community and how they either preferred or were

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<sup>11</sup> See C. Vann Woodward in *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (1971) where he describes the importance of white solidarity and the prevention of solidarity across race/class lines (51, 415).



forced to isolate themselves from the rest of the Mississippi Delta's social community, a tactic adapted from black/white models of segregation.

In an essay titled "Mostly About Myself," Anzia Yeziarska expresses similar feelings of isolation as an immigrant: "In the days of poverty I used to think there was no experience that tears through the bottom of the earth like the hunger for bread. But now I know, more terrible than the hunger for bread is the hunger for people" (36). Comparing her loneliness and rejection to the physical hunger, Yeziarska indicates the pain associated with her exclusion from society. It shows that she is made to feel inferior to the white middle class, as if she is unworthy of not only bread, but also a sense of belonging, a place in society.

Similarly, Rocconi recalls that when he worked for J.A. Crawford, his son became sick and was prescribed medicine that Rocconi had to pick up from Crawford's home, but when he arrives, he is not allowed inside. He writes: "What I remember most vividly was that while I was there in these circumstances, in the manager's house everyone was having a good time, because another Italian fellow, who played the harmonica well, was there entertaining the manager and his family. And I had to stay there listening to the music" (104). Like Yeziarska's being denied a sense of place and belonging, Rocconi is not only denied the right to enter the home, but he is also denied medicine for his son. Rocconi's depiction of the power of segregation and exclusion is powerful and reminiscent of stories of black/white segregation. The landowner does not think of Rocconi enough as a person to allow him inside, and while Rocconi believes that as Crawford's employee, he should be afforded his kindness, perhaps he is promptly reminded that his services on Crawford's land do not make him an equal in the eyes of his employer.

Like Rocconi, Yeziarska describes the white, middle-class Americans who mistreated her: "When I first came to America, the coldness of the Americans used to rouse in me the fury

of a savage. Their impersonal, non-committal air was like a personal insult to me...But now when I meet an Anglo-Saxon, I want to cry out to him; 'We're friends, we're friends, I tell you! We understand the same things, even though we seem to be so different on the outside'" (137). One way of thinking about Rocconi's isolation is illustrated by Yeziarska here; while she sees similarities between herself and whites, even considering them her friends, she is not seen as an equal. She wants to show those who reject her that she is their equal, but she is not even allowed the opportunity. In both texts, the harsh realities of segregation are clear; white ethnic immigrants were constantly reminded that although they participated in the socio-economic system that allowed their employers and the white middle-class to prosper, they were not considered their equals.

After eleven Italians were lynched in New Orleans in 1891 following the murder of the city chief of police, many Southerners feared Italians. In fact, only Italians from northern and central Italy were encouraged to immigrate to the Mississippi Delta because they had to be "the right kind" of immigrants, meaning that they, according to white American assumptions, would have experience in agriculture and have lighter skin than the southern Italians. And, even though this was the case, when the Italians from northern and central Italy "arrived on the scene, the white community refused to accept them" (Whayne 35). According to Jeannie M. Whayne, they were a "'third race' between blacks and whites...they were poor, Catholic, and spoke little to no English" (35). In this way, Italians in the South experienced what Yeziarska describes. At first, they were considered violent and dangerous, and it was not until they began to work at Sunnyside Plantation that they began to be considered hardworking and diligent though still untrustworthy. They were not welcomed into white upper-class society.

Unlike Yezierska, though, Rocconi does not express a desire to have a relationship with non-Italian immigrants. He never expresses the need to explain to a white man that they are alike, despite their differences. Perhaps that is because Rocconi saw no similarities between himself and the Americans that surrounded him, and ultimately, he had no desire to become like the white men, whom he characterizes as thieves. Perhaps in Rocconi's eyes, he has nothing in common with the men for whom he works because they steal from him and the other sharecroppers. While he does share their ambition to be financially successful, he does not agree with their means of achieving their goal.

In many ways, Rocconi's description of the mistreatment he suffered at the hands of white Southerners coincides with Yezierska and di Donato's stories. In a sense, their reluctance to assimilate, opting instead to isolate themselves within the community of their origin is understandable. They had been used by Americans to literally build the country from the ground up. For Rocconi, the Italians built the Mississippi Delta as they "clear[ed] the woods and, from one year to another, they discovered good pieces of land. They built ditches to drain and dry marshes, they leveled many woods, mostly with the help of Italian laborers. So in a few years these lands, once cursed became beautiful places to live, where people would pay a lot of money to have their own house" (53-54). Here, Rocconi notes how property development ushered in the next phase of the New South, the industrialization of plantations. His description of Italians clearing Sunnyside and Red Leaf Plantations implies that exploitation of Italians was a means to an end, a way of clearing fertile land that would insure the wealth of white landowners, while the immigrants who built their prosperity would be left behind.

Similarly, di Donato describes the Italian bricklayers' lives: "The barrow he pushed, he did not love. The stones that brutalized his palms, he did not love. The great God Job, he did not

love...the ever mounting weight of structures that he *had to! had to!* raise above his shoulders!...The language of worn oppression and the despair of realizing that his life had been left on brick piles” (18). And, finally, Yeziarska’s laundry maid in “Soap and Water” reflects, “I, with my dirty, tired hands, I am ironing the clean, the immaculate shirtwaists of clean, immaculate society. I, the unclean one, am actually fashioning the pedestal of their cleanliness, from which they reach down, hoping to lift me to the height that I have created for them” (73). In all three cases, the immigrant’s burden caused by the backbreaking work they must do in order to survive in the U.S., and in order for the American to live easily, is illustrated. It seems as if it would have been impossible to fully embrace the American way of life when the American way of life was what had oppressed them all along.

## Fighting World War II and “Winning” Acceptance

As an Italian in the United States during World War II, Rocconi probably felt even more conflicted about his Italian-American identity. During the war, German and Italian prisoners of war were imprisoned in the Mississippi Delta, and though Rocconi does not write about this event, one can imagine that the presence of the prisoners heightened tension between whites and Italians in the region.<sup>12</sup> According to Paul Canonici in *The Delta Italians*,

Delta Italians were looked upon with suspicion because Italy had sided with Germany in the war. Italians were required to remove pictures of Mussolini from display in their homes. U.S. Officials went to Italian homes and collected guns and shortwave radios. Josephine Pandolfi Belenchia said they even took an Italian version of *Romeo and Juliet* from their home . . . Noncitizens were pressured into becoming naturalized American citizens. There was even talk of deportation. (72-73)

Four of Rocconi's sons served in the United States military during World War II, about which Rocconi writes, “Another war is in progress now, as I'm writing this. It threatens to be more destructive than that of 1914—May God forbid it!” (70). One can imagine that during the war, Rocconi was torn between his allegiance to his native country and to the country for which his

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<sup>12</sup> In *Dear Boys: World War II Letters from a Woman Back Home*, editors Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith write about Mrs. Keith Somerville's weekly column in the *Bolivar Commercial*. They note that Mrs. Somerville “devoted considerable attention to the wartime activities of the various ethnic groups in Bolivar County, often tying her comments to larger issues and world events. When Italian prisoners of war were brought to Bolivar County to pick cotton, she used this occurrence to discuss the impact of the war on local persons of Italian ancestry” (7). In her column on October 22, 1943, Somerville refers to the Italians' presence as “Cleveland's latest excitement” (146). She writes that there were over one thousand Italian prisoners there who were picking cotton.

sons were fighting. We might assume that he began writing the manuscript because he feared the loss of his sons and wanted to leave his story for them.

Though Rocconi never criticizes the U.S. or Italian involvement in World War II, he does write positively about the United States. He writes, “They now make three soldiers for Uncle Sam, under the shadow of the glorious Stars. They are fighting for the sake of democracy and the defeat of the tyrants, as they are called here” (7). Perhaps he adopts this perspective because his children’s lives are at stake as they fight for their native country. However, his patriotism does not necessarily show that he thinks of himself as an American. In fact, his laudatory tone in phrases such as “shadow of the glorious Stars” seems imitative and contrived. He distances himself from an American perspective when he writes “tyrants, as they are called here” (7). It seems as if he does not want to associate himself with the American point of view that the Japanese are tyrants, and his statement has the tone of an observer of the conflict, rather than an American participant. Though he shows his support, his allegiance to the United States and his view of himself as an American appears questionable.

He also writes about his fears for his sons and about having a responsibility to “save the Country” (7). He calls Riccardo’s departure, “painful” (7) and writes, “They go to war, to fight a powerful and well equipped enemy. They go to meet the fire that pushes red-hot bullets, bullets that are pouring from the front, rear, from the air and all around. These thoughts bring tears to your eyes, all the privations and suffering these boys are going to meet” (7). Rocconi’s main concern is not whether he is Italian or American, but rather, for the safety of his sons. He prays that the war will end quickly and that “the victory of the just and with a peace with justice for all people on earth so to avert the danger of future wars” (7). While it seems that Rocconi’s concerns about identity are set aside during the war, his reflections on the war are more complex.

We might reflect on the bitter irony that his sons, as soldiers in the American army, are finally accepted as Americans, but at the potential cost of their lives. In Rocconi's experience, he and his family have never been treated as equals until their help is needed. Perhaps these are the thoughts that "bring tears to [his] eyes" (7), the fact that his sons are seen as American soldiers while at war, but would have been considered inferior in the eyes of the segregated South.

### **Father, Son, Writer, and Catholic: Hybridity and Identity in *The Story of My Life***

Reflecting Rocconi's sense of doubleness, *The Story of My Life* is written in two styles: narrative and episodic. The first part is a cohesive narrative that describes his progress from a poor Italian sharecropper in Italy to a proud, successful landowner in Mississippi. Had his narrative ended with this first part, having little introspection and focusing primarily on his accomplishments, then it would have followed that it could be viewed as a successful "American Dream" story; however, as the second and third parts unfold a collection of journalistic episodes that document his day-to-day life, his narrative becomes darker in tone, more introspective, revealing his faults and disappointments.

These differing versions of self delineate the formal elements of the narrative and show both his strong feelings of responsibility to tell an upward mobility story, and at the same time, an inability to ignore the fact that in the moment in which he is writing, he does not feel as if he has achieved the American Dream. We might see Rocconi's manuscript as undermining the American Dream narrative because it is not solely one of upward mobility. Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*, for instance, describes her experience with being reborn an American; she writes, "I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over...I am just as much out of the way as if I were dead, for I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell...My life I have still to live; her life ended when mine began" (1). For Antin, Americanization was what her parents wanted for her; they "knew only that they desired us to be like American children" (213). And, in the end, Mary's story concludes with her embracing America stating, "I love my beautiful city spreading all about me. I love the world. I love my place in the world" (236) and



considering herself “the youngest of America’s children” (286). “Mine,” she writes, “is the whole majestic past, and mine is the shining future” (286).

Like Antin, the first part of Rocconi’s manuscript is dominated by idealism and optimism. His purpose is clear; he wants to recreate an ideal version of his life and tell it to an audience that will appreciate his successes. Because the first part is written as a narrative, it can be read in isolation as a cohesive text with an almost fairy tale-like tone in the beginning.

Rocconi writes:

In those olden times, west of Senigallia and east of Ostra there was a village called St. Martino and Villafranca, they used to say that it belonged to Senigallia with the body and to Ostra with the soul, because the town itself was closer to Ostra, Province of Ancona, in the Region called Le Marche, Italy. In this village lived a well to do family, in a nice house recently rebuilt in brick, with a property of 16-20 ‘coppe’ of land. (1)

With this tone, Rocconi creates distance between himself as writer and as character so as to convey the impression of an ideal character, story, and life to the reader. His conflict and struggle with financial ruin and discrimination begins with his work for Signor Cuicchi and continues with the landowners he works for in the Mississippi Delta. In the end, he presents a concise conclusion to his story, resolving his conflict by acquiring financial stability and independence.

In stating that the first part of Rocconi’s narrative is idealized, I do not intend to make light of the hardships that he describes in the first part of the manuscript; he makes clear that life at Red Leaf Plantation in Arkansas was traumatic for the Italian immigrants: “It was the 15<sup>th</sup> of

November 1906 when we reached this rich promised land for many people, not for us..for us was only rich of toil, illness, and pain. I don't know whether there is room to fit the word happiness, a word that was seldom used in our vocabulary during the years spent in America" (53). However, only in the first part of the manuscript does he describe how he lifted himself and his family out of financial ruin and discrimination, and he does so with little introspection. Even when he writes about buying his first piece of land, he does so with little emotion. He matter-of-factly states, "I bought the entire property for \$9,600, I paid \$2,000 down and I took \$3500 from a loan company, payable in 20 years or less, at the rate of \$280 per year and the others in 4 equal installments to be paid in the first 4 years, at the rate of about \$600 per year, which I paid regularly. At the present I have only to pay part of the debt left with the loan company" (75). Rocconi (like the McCaslins in William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*) keeps a ledger of all of his finances, including his debts; perhaps, for Rocconi, his ledger represented his achievement of the ideal, landownership and financial stability. Ironically, though, as it is a record of his debts to white plantation owners, it also indicates that he is a commodity and asset to the white plantation owners that he owes. Thus, Rocconi, even in creating an ideal portrait of upward mobility early on, shows that his status as an immigrant prevented his full participation in the American economy.

Though the first part of *The Story of My Life* concludes on a positive note—he writes about being financially stable enough to contribute to the new Catholic Church and that he “became a citizen on January 23, 1928, in the Federal Court of Clarksdale, Mississippi” (119)—what follows in parts two and three is not a cohesive story of an immigrant who has adopted the American way of life as Antin does, nor a celebration of the aspects of the American Dream that he has acquired. Instead, parts two and three are daily reflections on the events in his life,

prayers, and confessions. More introspective in tone, parts two and three of Rocconi's narrative include page upon page about the unexpected passing of his wife, "praying for the peace of her soul" (25) and recounting multiple times the day that she passed, intending at first not to leave out a single detail, then to place the blame of her death on himself, and later to open up about his loneliness. He writes: "It is the greatest sorrow that man can experience, it leaves one unconscious, out of the mind" (28). Here, unlike in part one, Rocconi divulges his innermost feelings about his wife's death, and unlike Antin, who embraces America as her hope, seeks comfort in his Italian tradition of Catholicism and turns, instead, to God:

I wish God would give me the peace of mind, and the peace of my soul, together with His Holy Mercy . . . Do I pray? It seems to me that I'm praying, but is this prayer of mine well accepted by God? Who knows if I deserve Him? I really hope so. And if I am a sinner? I hope not. But who knows? Nobody but God. (25)

However, turning to God seems to fail him as he reveals his desperation for peace and his doubt that his prayers are working. In doing so, he shares an even deeper doubt about God, his acceptance of his prayers, and of his worthiness in God's eyes. Ultimately, Rocconi's introspection shows that his real concern, beyond the death of his wife, is his loneliness and isolation, the feeling that even God has turned away from him. We might see his purpose in parts two and three as not to impress the reader with an upward mobility story; rather, the reader may see Rocconi pointing out that his successes came at the cost of hardships such as homogenization and isolation.

In addition to the hybrid forms that Rocconi uses, the manuscript addresses multiple audiences, which alters his purpose for writing. We might interpret his idealized narrative as an

attempt to appeal to an American audience or to his family in order to prove his ability to be successful in the United States. At times, he directly addresses the reader with statements such as, “Now let us return to that part that I had interrupted to talk about the facts of school” (20). Statements like this one indicate his careful attention to clarity and detail and his awareness of audience. He involves his reader in the storytelling process as if he were telling it orally. Though he writes about doubting his abilities as a writer, he uses statements like this one to show that he can tell a non-linear story and reminding the reader that he has control over his narrative.

He also advises his reader to live a life of prayer. For example, he often tells the reader, “We should pray and thank Him [God] all the time” (46). At first glance, the religious nature of his advice indicates that his purpose is rooted in his strong faith. However, he also criticizes himself in confessional passages such as “I wrote a lot advising everyone to pray, but I’m not praying” (52). Perhaps this contradiction points out his doubts, rather than his conviction, in his faith, and it presents the possibility that Rocconi’s advice is not solely faith-based, but also reflects the deliberate performance of a virtuous Catholic. He writes:

That’s why we are in this world, to honor and love Him and His laws, to give Him, at the end, our souls. Only for this we are here, we are born. This pilgrimage on earth can have a good result . . . it depends on our faith in God, in the education we have of the things concerning our Church, in the observance of the Holy laws, of the teaching of the Church. You cannot be a good catholic if you don’t know the secrets of the religion, if you don’t listen to your priest’s voice. May God bless us all. (23-24)

In this passage, we might read his narrative as imitative of a priest's sermon, as if he is simply repeating what he heard at church earlier that day. Moreover, I wonder if his purpose is to educate others about the importance of being a "good Catholic," to meditate upon his own actions, or simply a performance intended to show his reader and God that he is a virtuous person. While I do not doubt that Rocconi had faith, I am positing that the contradiction between his advice to others about prayer and his own doubts about prayer point out more than one motive, including the possibility that he is simply playing the role of a good Catholic or that through passages like this one, he is persuading himself to follow his own advice.

In some moments, he addresses God directly. For instance, in the last entry of part three, he writes: "My God I'm asking your forgiveness for all the offenses You received by me, with my thoughts, with my words, with my acts. I admit it. I'm a sinner and You know better than anyone else. Forgive me if I'm worth it and put me in the rank of your servants. May Your Grace descend upon me and be with me for the rest of my life and then in Heaven" (50). Here, again, I am compelled to think that Rocconi's purpose is multifarious. This passage can be viewed as a sincere confession, but if so, why does he make it a "public" one? Rocconi, attentive of his audience throughout the narrative, is no doubt conscious that he is sharing his confession, his most private moment of prayer, with his reader. Perhaps his purpose is to again show the reader that he is a devout Catholic. In addition, he might believe that confession, though seemingly private, must be made public in order for it to be taken sincerely, and it is also possible that Rocconi uses his confession to humble himself before his reader and God. What is most important, however, is not his purpose, necessarily, but rather the effect that his confession has on our understanding of the strong influence Catholicism had on Rocconi's identity and his ideas about how a good person should live.

Throughout the manuscript, Rocconi presents multiple versions of himself; his use of narrative form and multiple audiences depicts him as both an ideal and a flawed individual, suggesting that it is difficult for him to define his subjectivity. One of the major themes in Rocconi's work is his tenuous closeness to his family. His relationship with family members can best be described as close with the potential for distance. This distance can, at times, be attributed to the fact that he is an immigrant, but at others, it is linked to his belief in traditional Italian gender roles. The conflict between feeling close to family and simultaneously distant from his family conveys one way in which he presents his conflicted sense of self.

Rocconi presents himself as a devoted son and father most vividly when he describes the separation from his mother that he experienced when he immigrated and the separation of his sons from his wife when they join the army to fight in World War II. Rocconi describes leaving his family in Italy as being so difficult that "No pen can describe that scene" (38). He writes: "My poor mother, literally overcome with grief, didn't know what she was doing. She embraced me strongly and kissed me over and over again, crying loudly: 'My poor sons, I shall never see you again, you are like dead, this is the biggest sorrow that will soon take me to my grave'" (38). He goes on to briefly reflect on his separation from his mother:

. . . A mother's love has no limit, nor measure, and a separation such as ours was going to be very, very painful, it is an unsurpassable grief, and our poor mother suffered it, and it was a terrible shock for her already weakened nerves. She was right when she said: "I'll never see you again...never!" Unfortunately her words came true, from that moment when we looked in each others' eyes filled with bitter tears, on the threshold of our home,

that was the last vision, the last image that always will remain  
carved in my heart. Yes, ma...we didn't see each other anymore!

(39)

In this scene, Rocconi's love and devotion to his mother is heightened with his separation from her. It is one of the rare times in the first part of the manuscript in which he reflects and shares his emotions with the reader. Rocconi, like his mother, does not want to become separated, though the temptation of America and its promise to end his family's poverty and to rid him of the unfair Italian sharecropping system is too great. Thus, a moment of true affection and love is shown by a moment of separation.

In the diary form of the manuscript, Rocconi illustrates a memory in which family closeness and separation are juxtaposed again in his life. When his son Alberto joins the American army to serve in World War II, three of Rocconi's sons were serving in the United States military already. He describes his wife, Giustina, who is wrought with grief about their son's departure:

My wife after resisting for a while burst into tears, bitter tears:

'There are four now to be killed. I would have never believed that I had to raise my children to have them killed by war!' She was talking like that because lately she had not received any news from Riccardo and Giulio, and with her sobbing she caused the rest of the family to cry. Rose, Clara, Ida, Willie, Jim, we were all moved, but I resisted. I did not cry. I tried to be strong, but my heart was bleeding inside while I watched this moving scene. That was really painful. (11)

This scene is strikingly parallel to the one in which Rocconi says goodbye to his mother. In both cases, the mother bursts into tears, assuming her children will die while they are away. With these scenes, we might see Rocconi calling attention to the parallels between the injustice of military sacrifice and his being compelled to immigrate. In both cases, death is the predetermined, assumed outcome, and while it is a realistic outcome of both situations, it seems as if the assumption of death stems from the mothers' anxiety about the family being separated and the metaphorical death of the family unit.

Perhaps Rocconi recognized the parallels between his separation from his mother and the potential for his children's separation from Giustina in the early 1940s to serve in the military, and, as a result, he began to write *The Story of My Life*. One of his original purposes for writing the manuscript was "for my children and their offspring" (1), and it can be assumed that the manuscript itself is symbolic of his desire to maintain a closeness with his family even after his, or at the time, his children's, potential deaths had separated them.

Besides these most vivid examples, Rocconi's description of his family in Italy and his wife and children in America are very limited, stoic, and practical. For example, he says that he and his father discussed the matter of his work with Signor Ciucchi "because I used to confide in my father" (22); but other than this brief mention of his father, his departure from his family, and a sketch of his family tree, he provides little introspection concerning his family.

When he decides to marry, he describes his practical approach to choosing a wife: "after many considerations and talks with neighbors, some friends since my childhood, I got engaged on November 20, 1907, to a girl whom after only three months, on February 22, 1908, I made my wife" (55). While he describes Giustina as "always affectionate, honest" (56) and while he does describe his wedding day, he does so in a very pragmatic manner. He writes, "So I got



married, not thinking much about it as many do now. Now they don't get married unless they have enough money, a house well furnished, etc.” (57). There is very little description of his wife after this scene in the narrative, except when he is describing Giustina's or one of his children's illnesses, or when he writes about his children's marriages, which always include the amount paid to the doctor or priest. It is not my intention to portray Rocconi as unaffectionate or uncaring, but rather a man who considered family matters in a practical, traditional manner, except when like the examples illustrate above, there is a potential for distance or when he is separated from his family members. A wife and children helped him to run the farm which meant he could achieve financially. As long as they supported him, they would be provided for. Rocconi's love and devotion to his family is expressed in the most detrimental separation he experiences, the unexpected death of Giustina; but even then, he eventually sees himself as a victim and replaces his wife.

After Giustina's death from a massive aneurism, he provides a sketch of the story. Then he retells it, blaming himself for his “unwillingness to help her” (40) in the garden the day of her death. He expresses his sorrow and guilt caused by her loss: “My sorrow was great, infinite, I cannot explain it, but I felt oppressed as by a heavy weight on my heart, all over me, it gave me a kind of bewilderment that sometimes I felt to lose control of myself” (30). And, later, his devastation is most apparent when addresses her directly:

My dearly beloved wife, my faithful companion, who for 38 years,  
had been a joy at my side, my dear Giustina, may you rest in  
peace, and the eternal light shine forever on your soul. You are up  
there Giustina in the Land of Justice, in the peace of God's  
Kingdom to pray for me and for our loving children. You can see

me, and hear me, you are smiling at me . . . I cannot see you, I  
cannot hear you . . . But, as soon as my soul will have wings, like  
yours, and will leave this world forever, then it will join you up  
there, where you are, in the Blessed Heaven, prepared by God for  
His creatures, then we will surely be united and happy, forever,  
and ever. (37)

By calling heaven a “land of justice,” we might see Rocconi implying that his life on earth is one of injustice and that he is positioning himself as a victim of his immigrant status and of his wife’s death. For the reader, it seems as if Rocconi feels that Guistina is no longer subject to the injustice that they faced as immigrants, but he also acknowledges the injustice of being abandoned by her. He indicates the distance between himself and his wife by writing, “I cannot see you, I cannot hear you” (37). He views his life in “this world” (37) as unhappy because he is alone in a world of injustice and believes that being “united” (37) with her is the only way he will regain his happiness.

Rocconi’s words are reminiscent of Annunziata’s in Pietro di Donato’s *Christ in Concrete* who, grief-stricken by Geremio’s tragic death, prays to God and to Geremio:

O Jesu in Heaven, and husband near . . . bread of Job and job of  
Bread has crushed your feet from the ground and taken your eyes  
from the sun, but nowhere are we separate—never-never in this  
breathing life shall I be away from you. Day and night will I kiss  
your wounds, with my flesh shall I keep the rain from you, these  
tears shall comfort you in heat, and with the cold shall I breath  
upon you my warmth . . . husband great. (49)

While both Annunziata and Rocconi use prayer to express their grief and hope of being united with their spouses again, unlike Rocconi, Annunziata does not see Geremio's death as a abandonment. Rather, she says, "never-never in this breathing life shall I be away from you" (49). Their different perspectives on the deaths of their spouses may be due to the fact that *Christ in Concrete* is fiction; however, there are many other explanations for it. Perhaps, Rocconi sees himself as the victim of his wife's death because he had been separated from his family when he immigrated, and his wife's death produced similar feelings of abandonment and loneliness. For example, on the first anniversary of his wife's death, he writes,

I left my parents, I would say when I was about fifteen, then at  
twenty one, when I emigrated to America, I never saw them again.  
I lost a sister, Maria, when she was about 38, and now my beloved  
companion, whom I have chosen for the rest of my life, she also  
left me, giving me the deepest sorrow. (33)

He views his deep sorrow as the result of being abandoned by his family, his sister, and now his wife. We might see Rocconi associating the death of his family with the loss of his homeland and his position in it. For Rocconi, perhaps Giustina's death reminds Rocconi of the loss of his native homeland, causing him to associate it with the loss of his new home in the United States.

Without his wife, his sense of place has been compromised; thus, he feels not only abandoned, but also without an ideal homeland and role to play in it. It seems as if he does not see himself, as Annunziata does, as living with his deceased family members even after their death. Rather, he dwells on the separation and his feelings of abandonment.

Though Rocconi compares the suffering he feels in the absence of his family with the death of his wife, he states that the real difference between the two losses is that without his wife,

he cannot fulfill his sexual desires. On the first anniversary of his wife's death, he writes about passing the "ugly crises of desire from the rebellious flesh...[and] surmount[ing] the crises" (33). However, his rhetoric is clever in this passage as he appeals to the reader's sympathy by noting how often he has experienced loss in his life and to the reader's logic as he explains how he successfully avoided "temptresses" (33) for a year after his wife's death. Rocconi appeals to his own sense of practicality as he justifies his worthiness of "a companion...a female companion" (33) with his abandonment and his repression of his sexual desires. After writing extensively about his grief over his wife's death, Rocconi's view that he has, in a sense, completed his period of self-control or penance, complicates our reading of the earlier passages in which he mourns Giustina's death.

It is possible that Rocconi's approach stems from his psychological, physical, and emotional needs, but it is also likely that his belief in traditional gender roles influence his need for a new wife. He describes all of Giustina's household duties, and at times, speaks directly to her about the jobs that she is no longer able to do for him. Rocconi writes,

She used to take care of everything: house, vegetable garden, chickens; she prepared everything: cooking, clothes; she used to do the washing . . . She didn't live long enough . . . You are not with me anymore, to keep me company. You are not preparing my clothes, the food, and you cannot give me any more injections [of insulin]. Without you, I'm without everything . . . I feel like I cannot stand it. I can't resist it, but I'll have to get accustomed to everything now. (32)

His statement, “she didn’t live long enough” (32) seems to be coded. One might perceive Rocconi to be expressing his sincere grief over her death and wishing that they could have shared a longer life together. However, the context of this paragraph, Rocconi’s catalogue of Giustina’s domestic duties, suggests that he does not view his life with her as one in which they enjoy an equal footing or mutual love, necessarily; instead, it seems as if he is saying that “she did not live long enough” for him. Of course, he uses his inability to complete domestic tasks on his own as yet another justification for a new wife, furthering the notion that from Rocconi’s perspective marriage was about fulfilling one’s role or duty to his/her spouse. Only when Rocconi experiences the pain caused by his distancing from family members does he express affection and emotion; more often he takes on a practical, traditional approach to family matters, making his intentions and emotions difficult to determine.

Furthermore, according to Bret E. Carroll in *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*, “The immigrants that came to the United States between 1880 and 1914 from southern and eastern Europe frequently brought with them social relations grounded in traditional notions of patriarchal power” (356). Rocconi experiences a “crisis in masculinity” when Giustina dies. As an immigrant, his access to white, middle and upper-class wealth, class, and power was initially denied (and always limited), and as a result, the only place where he could assert his masculine power was in the home. Without Giustina and his children, however, his patriarchal power is compromised as well, leaving him pondering his place not only in the South, but also in his home and with his family.

When Rocconi describes his tenuous relationship with his children, the reader might see him reflecting on his position as patriarch and his family’s responsibility to him. Carroll notes that “the social and economic environment they [immigrants] entered offered opportunities that

allowed individual family members to challenge and escape patriarchal power, leaving many immigrant fathers feeling that their masculine identities had been compromised” (356). For Rocconi, this causes a collapse of not only tradition, but also of his position as patriarch. Ironically, only months before Rocconi writes about his children helping him in the absence of his wife, he writes about feeling abandoned by them. His children “go here and there, to their in-laws, to the movies. At times I go because they ask me to, sometimes I don’t go. I let them go by themselves, because I have the feeling I’m intruding” (47). Rocconi’s children have embraced English and the American way of life, and Rocconi has not, resulting in him feeling not only isolated from them, but also as if his patriarchal position has been challenged. Later, though, he writes about how they help him: “It seems to me that I’m a burden to my sons and daughters, and daughters-in-law, that they have to take care of me as far as cooking, cleaning, and for the injections, etc...therefore, I think I should remarry” (50). In both instances, Rocconi feels that he is a burden to his family; however, his resulting isolation seems contradictory to his belief that his family should help him. While he wants their help, he also distances himself from them, acknowledging, again, the difficulty he has with defining his role and position in relationships.

In the passage above, the reader might also infer that Rocconi is reflecting on the costs of his and his children’s assimilation to white American norms. Though the reader may see Rocconi’s integration into white society as a means of acquiring financial stability, class status, and power, Rocconi does not, necessarily, encourage other forms of assimilation such as speaking English. Rocconi writes: “Then, when we are all at home, together they converse in their own language, English, it’s easier for them, but it would be much better for me and more understandable, if they would speak Italian. Thus the convenience of the language is denied me” (47). In this passage, Rocconi notes the distance between himself and his children. The

consequence of his property ownership and middle class status is that his children are offered white middle class opportunities such as education, second language acquisition, and inclusion into white society, but at the cost of his own heritage and language. Perhaps, in this moment, Rocconi feels isolated because he is torn between the pride and guilt associated with his own lack of assimilation to whiteness.

Similarly, when Father Rotondo leaves the Mississippi Delta, Rocconi, again, feels abandoned. Rocconi felt that Rotondo “was not only my pastor but an adviser and a friend. He was the only one to whom I could confide. I would say he was the only one who understood me among so many Italians. It was a consolation for me to know that I had someone to whom I could go for my spiritual comfort and also to exchange conversation” (51). Based on this statement, it seems as if even among the Italian-American community, Rocconi had limited his intimate social interactions to just one individual. He only shared his thoughts with Rotondo, who allowed him to speak Italian, and did not pressure him to step outside his comfort zone, to be an “American.”

Once Rotondo leaves, Rocconi is presented with an even more difficult problem that causes him to isolate himself even more: he has no one to confess to in Italian. He writes about his disappointment in Father Peter Quinn, the new pastor of Our Lady of Victories Church in Cleveland, Mississippi because he “didn’t hear him [Quinn] speak my language, only some, almost incomprehensible, monosyllables. Perhaps although he doesn’t speak Italian, he understands it...But I don’t find the same satisfaction for my soul, the same I had when I used to confide in Father Rotondo, that is talking in Italian” (51-52). For Rocconi, the language barrier, and his discomfort with not being able to confess in Italian, is a constant struggle. Throughout the last two parts of the manuscript, Rocconi uses his diary as a space for confession; he worries

that he will not go to heaven because he has not been able to confess in Italian regularly, and he bears the burden of a heavy conscience.

As a result, his struggle with not speaking English not only causes him to feel isolated by his family and friends, but also by God. In part one of the manuscript, Rocconi shows his religious devotion by praying for relatives who have passed away and mentioning that he goes to “Mass on holidays” (17) when he is growing up in Italy. Once in the United States, he is disappointed about having to work on St. Joseph’s Day when he works at Red Leaf Plantation (60); however, he is still able to attend mass in Italian. He later contributes to building a Catholic church in Cleveland, Mississippi, attends the Eucharistic Congress in New Orleans, and prays often for his family.

However, as the manuscript progresses, we see Rocconi’s relationship with God weakening, due to what seems to be two reasons: his inability to practice his faith in the Italian language and his increasing feelings of loneliness and abandonment. Soon after Giustina’s death, he writes, “Do I pray? It seems to me that I’m praying, but is this prayer of mine well accepted by God? Who knows if I deserve Him?” (35). His wife’s death certainly plays a role in his loneliness and in his negativity towards his religious devotion, but even after he remarries and the supposed lack of companionship is filled by his second wife, he continues to doubt his relationship with God. It seems more likely that his depression and loneliness is caused not only by his wife’s death, but by the fact that he felt that the world had abandoned him, and that he, in turn, had abandoned God.

Beginning with the epilogue of part two, Rocconi’s manuscript becomes almost entirely confessional. Living in the United States not only caused him to abandon his language and his land of origin, but he was also not able to practice his faith as he wanted. In the epilogue to part



two of the manuscript, he writes, “I wrote a lot advising everyone to pray, but I’m not praying. I’m not praying as I should. I don’t know whether I will. I believe I prayed, I hope so, but I don’t know whether I prayed well and enough. Only God knows that” (80). These feelings of self-doubt are followed by lengthy passages such as “Some Facts About All the Clergymen I Met,” which are, in fact, more about his ability or inability to practice Catholicism due to the various priests that served in the area where he lived in the Mississippi Delta. He writes about hardly knowing his pastor at times and about places where there was “no parish, nor a steady pastor” (10), and at these times, he was not able to confess or receive communion. He repeatedly asks for forgiveness for having not performed his duty as a Catholic: “I’m nothing! You know all my actions, as a boy, as an adult, and now as an old man...I recommend my soul to you, to have the forgiveness for my sins, for all the times that I neglected You during the past years of my life” (13). Rocconi’s self-doubt and feelings of sinfulness are not necessarily caused by his unwillingness to practice his faith; he blames himself for not practicing his faith, when in actuality, the ability to do so in the rural South simply was not available.

Rocconi’s feelings about being sinful and abandoning his religious responsibilities affect him so strongly that he even questions his choice to write *The Story of My Life*. In part one, he remarks that his writing is an enjoyable hobby, and his only doubts about his writing come from his lack of education. However, in part three, he fears that his writings have been sinful, and hopes that he has not been “proud, haughty, conceited” (1). He does reiterate that he only wrote because it was an enjoyed pastime, reassuring the reader, and more likely, himself, that he “didn’t write these pages for my glory and praise or for a vain triumph of pride” (1). He wonders if writing is “the right thing, especially for my soul” (24), and questions his writing’s sinfulness: “who knows that I’m not committing a sin?...What a fool I am...” (27). It seems as if Rocconi’s

real fear is rooted in the sinfulness of his desire to write; however, in a place where Rocconi could not have felt more abandoned by the larger social community and where his ability to practice Catholicism was rarely possible, his desire to write might have been his only means of communicating his thoughts and feelings. It is his inability to fulfill any desire, I would argue, that leads him to consider the very things he enjoys, the things that are not necessarily desires, but rather, enjoyable, to be sinful. Thus, as Rocconi begins to think of his writing hobby, his only outlet for reflection and communication, as a sinful act, he continues to distance himself from God.

Despite his concerns about his writing being sinful, Rocconi continues to write. As his health declines and he feels that he is nearing death he writes lengthy passages titled “Death” and “Confessions.” In these passages, he reflects on times when he has been sinful, worries that he truly only prayed “5 or 6 times” (47), confesses to being “too harsh...or too domineering” (48) with Giustina, and asks forgiveness for cursing his landowners and for feeling “superior” (50) at times among his neighbors.

Since Rocconi ends his manuscript with this tone, unlike the celebratory tone of Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land*, his words make an interesting contribution to our understanding of immigrants in American, especially in the rural South. Perhaps he felt that addressing God and his readers with a confession would be the most Christian way of ending his work, as I assume he would have wanted to end his life with a clear conscience. However, the tone and subject matter of the end of Rocconi’s manuscript is strangely similar to the end of *Christ in Concrete* in which Paul rejects God. While Rocconi does not reject the presence of God, the lengths to which he goes in order to pray for salvation leads me to believe that he did not feel confident about his relationship with God and that he felt distanced from God. It is not hard to imagine that Rocconi

and other immigrants felt the absence of God as Paul does while living in the South. Perhaps, like Annunziata fears for Paul in *Christ in Concrete*, Rocconi worries that the absence of God in his life has ruined his chances for receiving salvation.

Ending the manuscript with a confession, rather than celebrating his rebirth as an American, suggests that Rocconi ended his life with doubts, feelings of dissatisfaction, and emptiness. Like Paul's confession that he rejects God at the end of *Christ in Concrete*, Rocconi's conclusion suggests that for immigrants in the segregation-era New South, the ability to survive and to negotiate race and class segregation came at the cost of having to homogenize with white society and to reject their traditions, language, and heritage.

## Conclusion

Because Rocconi's original manuscript is currently unavailable, my analysis has had some limitations. For example, in the translation of *The Story of My Life*, Rocconi does not mention events such as the 1927 flood of the Mississippi Delta; writing about this moment in history as well as any other potentially omitted passages might shed light on racial and class tensions in the New South. Additionally, Rocconi's intentions, anxieties, and opinions about race, class, and gender might have been lost in translation, and the Italian language that he used might offer opportunities for more in-depth analysis of these themes. Rocconi mentions that in addition to writing *The Story of My Life*, he wrote several smaller books or diaries, which are also unavailable at this time. If these texts become accessible in the future, the potential implications of his body of work written in the Italian language might further contribute to our understanding of the immigrant experience in the South.

As it stands, however, *The Story of My Life* makes significant contributions to our understanding of a region that paradoxically encouraged immigrants to believe in a myth of equality, wealth, while excluding and isolating minorities through race and class segregation. Rocconi's narrative illustrates the role that white ethnic immigrants played in the white upper class's struggle to maintain power in the face of decades of race/class-based resistance, which culminated in the Civil Rights Movement; and it voices the resistance to injustice of the system just as early civil rights and economic justice movements did.<sup>13</sup> *The Story of My Life*, then, complicates the American ideology that lauded consent and denied descent. Rocconi's records

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<sup>13</sup> See Robin D.G. Kelley in *Hammer and Hoe* (1990).

and reflections contribute to our ongoing attempts to reconstitute the underrepresented history of those who built the New South, and by extension, the modern United States.

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## **Vita**

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