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## Reviews

### Review Essay

*The Grind* by Michael Cirelli. New York: Hanging Loose Press, 2013. 88pp.

Following *Lobster with Ol' Dirty Bastard* (2008), his witty debut collection in which hip-hop rhythms animate a world of youth full of loves, friendships, and very structured, complex family relationships, his more experimental and intimate second collection *Vacations on the Black Star Line* (2010), and the playful *Everyone Loves The Situation* (2011) where lyricism and personal reflection combine into an amusing analysis of the reality show "Jersey Shore," Michael Cirelli's fourth collection *The Grind* goes back to a more personal and autobiographical dimension. Originally from Providence, Rhode Island, the author reflects on his Italian upbringing in a family that for years has managed a renowned diner.

It is a well-known fact that food is often the privileged source of inspiration for writers and filmmakers. Specifically, the connection between food and words is intense. And if food can be or become poetry, it is thanks to its ability to transform itself into the very symbol of humans' aptitude to socialize, to nourish, to give care and attention, thus becoming a metaphor for life, love, and identity. Since Plato's *Symposium*, writers have invested in food a significant symbology as well as fundamental imagery of both a personal and collective nature.

But in Cirelli's case, this line of thought about food – which follows the most classic of Italian traditions – would lead us off track. If cuisine is an art characterized by a thousand tastes and aromas and, as a result, food becomes a memory whenever those same aromas and tastes bring to mind images, moods and memories, then *The Grind's* presentation of food and its preparation as a "sacrifice"--that is the denial of a personal life, of a collective and family sphere of affections--poses a truly stark contrast. If on one hand *The Grind* presents the catering profession as an honest and noble trade, proudly rewarded with official acknowledgments as well as the gratitude of customers, then on the other it sheds light on the hard work, sacrifice, and self-denial that running a restaurant entails.

In the first section of the book, entitled "J.P. Spoonem's," Cirelli introduces us to the diner where he spent his youth washing plates always trying his best to avoid actually washing them, and observing the great sacrifices made by his family while the rest of the city and its inhabitants changed and progressed. The author thus lingers on a job that, in spite of the dedication and self-abnegation put into it, fails to excite and yet demands that everything be sacrificed to it, perhaps claiming for itself the most private sphere of family affections. What emerges from these pieces is the sense of detachment from a life entirely dedicated to work and to the care of others,

the painful compassion for his parents who renounced a day off even on their wedding day: “Thirty years later/They still only have one/Day off a week/ But back then/There was none/And I think/About my dad/Making breakfast specials/Four hours before/*Death do us part.*” Work in the kitchen marks ever-so monotonous, exhausting days, and even the rhythmic “ting ting tap tapping” the author hears is not the clanging of “sword fighting” or of “hammer on anvil”, but the grayer, more banal and repetitive noise produced by a metal spatula turning over pancakes on a hot metal grill.

A trade that in its monotony of “*thirty years of doin’ this*” ends with “*What do I got, varicose veins . . .*” It is a job that eventually devours everything: time, energies, and affections. A reality that the author has a very hard time explaining as it is made of countless, continuous, small acts of self-denial and sacrifice: “The photos don’t show behind the knees,/Or the daily grind of bones, and hard/To tell by reading it, but days off in our family/Are hard to find.”

Thus yoked to a wheel, to this shrine of work, sacrifice, and duty, freedom and detachment are rendered inconceivable, so much so that after an absence due to medical reasons, “It’s good/to get back to The Grind./That’s the thing about The grind –/when you’re in it, you want out,/but when you don’t have it,/you miss The Grind.” Then, despite the relationship and respect for indisputably Italian people and traditions—such as the declared love for eggplants and the ‘pasta alla Norma’ –, for a culture that shows its evident Italian heritage in family rituals and sentences (“[Mema] taught me to eat/all my food because we were *lucky/to have it*. I’d use a slice of Italian bread/to wipe my plate clean”; or still “The myth of: *so you don’t have to/work like we do*), a doubt, a resistance, an incapacity to share and identify with emerges. This difficulty becomes incomprehensible and results in disagreement and incommunicability (“We don’t discuss these things in our family,/And my mother/Thinks I’m perfect. We’ve mastered burying/The dark stuff deep inside.”), which at times takes the form of an identity crisis in young Michael (“When I sang my/Critical Race Theory, they all thought I wanted/To be Black.”), or develops into an affective or cultural detachment (“the kitchen/that was like a dungeon to me”).

It is not a coincidence, then, that as the poems rattle off fragments of memories, small gestures and situations, their tone becomes colder and objectively detached. It is as if the young Cirelli continued observing his affections as they offered themselves to that relentless and exhausting job with a sense of extraneousness and incomprehension: (“Me framed behind that little square/window where sticky plates were passed: and my mind unconcerned with making clean”).

Only time and experience will eventually replace that emotional detachment with a greater participation and respect for a dedication to work that borders on self-sacrifice. The emotional gap is filled only in the final two sections, “The Grind” and “The Gods of Bahia.” A good dose of self-irony

and profound respect are both present in “Armchair Chef,” for instance, when Cirelli writes: “I’ve seen enough to know/What I’m doin’ here, chef from the armchair, and I/Can sing every note of the Pinot greeeej. More than that:/Dad works in the kitchen. So did my grandpa,/Who died deboning The Grind.”

Now that he is no longer part of that world, he is finally able to look back at those places and people with some nostalgia, at all those moments lost in the years he spent away from home, in other cities and places, years that he dedicated to study and training; only now that sacrifice, that hard and dark life that breaks your back, always in the service of the customer because “The customer is *always* right,” seem to gain dignity: “At my family’s diner, Mom is always smiling/And the place is spotless. Dad cooks every dish/The same, like it was life or death/Because it is.” With this place he can now identify himself: “If there is one place in the world/That is mine, it is 1678 BROAD STREET,/And my parents are the gods there—/They deal in eggs—/The regulars no longer recognize me—//Every morning they pull themselves/Out of bed and face that direction.” After all, this type of activity--like poetry--demands a strong discipline and a daily devotion to accomplish the perfection of form: “A bag of popcorn only took 60 seconds to be perfect/clouds! But metaphorically, popcorn is low art./Pork chops—low art. Boiled eggs are low/and underappreciated. My first book (five years),/still low art—and when I tip my pen in the direction/of my father, I realize I haven’t waited long enough/to get it right. Haven’t the craft yet to craft him scrupulous,/in his long white apron, behind a pot of simmering/tomatoes, waiting.”

Michael Cirelli’s voice is now quite recognizable in the contemporary poetry world due to his simple but firm tone that does not shy away from confronting and handling whatever topic as well as for his superb capacity to mix personal reminiscence--sometimes caring and moving, other times ironic and amused--to considerations that become more revealing and universal in nature. This capacity is fully reflected in *The Grind*. Here, however, the detachment that was mentioned earlier, the observation of his family through the keyhole and his voluntary estrangement from a life and profession that are not fully understood, prevent some of the poems from rising above the quality of the fact to become a truly significant metaphor of something wider and deeper in meaning.

**ROBERTO BARONTI MARCHIÒ**

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*Soldier of Christ: The Life of Pope Pius XII* by Robert A. Ventresca. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013. 432pp.

One would like to hail Ventresca’s book as the definitive biography of Pius XII. It would be more appropriate, however, to see it as the herald of