

Christiane Kiemle

Ways out of Babel:
Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Contemporary Literature in Italy

Exploring Multilingualism in the Works of Immigrated Writers

Immacolata Amodeo, Brendan Dooley (Eds.)

INTERCULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

Volume 2

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“Alors le vieux mythe biblique se retourne, la confusion des langues n’est plus une punition, le sujet accède à la jouissance par la cohabitation des langages, qui travaillent côte à côte: le texte de plaisir, c’est Babel heureuse.”
(Barthes 1973: 10)

1. Introduction

In January 2010, the Italian Intercultural Association *Eks&Tra* published an appeal for a petition on its homepage initiated by the writers Fatima Ahmed and Lidia Palazzolo. In an open letter these two authors, of Somali and of Argentinian origin, respectively, gave vent to their anger about what in their view were the inappropriate modalities of how the nominees of the literary award *Popoli in cammino* – instituted by the left-winged event *Festa Nazionale dell’Unità*¹ and designed for authors immigrated to Italy writing in Italian – are treated by the organizational team. The two petitioners expressed serious doubts about the organizers’ sincere appraisal of the literary production created by non-native Italian authors in Italy:

Purtroppo questa opportunità offerta per far emergere un’interessante produzione che fino a qualche anno fa era sommersa e poco evidenziata, ha gravi carenze di organizzazione che non vogliamo attribuire alla mala fede ma sicuramente ad una mancanza di valorizzazione di questo capitale che arricchisce il panorama culturale italiano. [...] Come abbiamo avuto già modo di chiederci, senza però una risposta, la domanda si ripresenta: si considera la nostra letteratura di seconda scelta, si pensa ancora ad un evento folcloristico, buonista, politicamente corretto, che elargisce un premio ai “poveri stranieri” ma che in realtà non merita poi particolare attenzione?²

The question posed by the two writers at the end of this quotation could be extended to the whole context of literary writings by immigrated authors in Italy, and be directed to the – by now still restricted – circle of intellectuals, scholars and laymen who have dedicated themselves to this young literary field: is there really a sincere interest in the linguistic and literary quality of the authors’ texts

¹ For further details see http://www.partitodemocratico.it/dettaglio/51731/popoli_in_cammino [28.04.2010].

² The open letter can be viewed on the internet: <http://www.petiziononline.it/petizione/firma-per-gli-scrittori-migranti/559> [28.04.2010].

or is it rather a compassionate interest mainly directed at the authors' personal backgrounds and at their migrant status, thus reducing their literary texts to autobiographical reports and primarily regarding their literary activity as an act of socio-political rebellion? Even though the just mentioned perspectives which have come to dominate the kind of attention paid to non-native Italian writers' texts in Italy certainly have their right and importance, this one-sided view risks the oversight of other important facets. In sum, the works of immigrated authors in Italy deserve a closer study with a major focus on the linguistic and aesthetic aspects of their writings.

The variety of terms which have been applied to these literary texts and the evident instability and inconsistency in terminology indicate the difficulties in comprehending these 'outsiders' in the context of contemporary literature in Italy. The present study tries to propose a new approach to these writings and to shine light upon aspects until now neglected in research by focusing on a detailed and comprehensive exploration of how linguistic and cultural diversity become manifest in these literary productions, and by also examining the effects of this traceable multilingualism in the authors' writings.

The following chapter gives an introduction to Italy's development from a country of emigration to a country of immigration and describes the emergence of immigrated writers who adopted Italy as their country of residence and Italian as their language of literary expression. Afterward, a critical discussion of common categories often applied to 'label' the authors and their writings is pursued. Chapter 3 then provides an overview of the state of research about this literary field, pointing to current trends and to gaps in research. Next, chapter 4 presents an outline of the tradition of linguistic heterogeneity in Italy's literature, followed by the attempt to locate in this context contemporary immigrated writers in Italy and their writings marked by multilingualism. Chapter 5 focuses on a descriptive analysis of select literary works by proposing an approach which allows for the categorizing and scrutinizing of the phenomena of explicit and implicit forms of multilingualism detectable in the authors' writings; a process which subsequently serves to explore in detail how linguistic and cultural diversity are made manifest in those writings. Chapter 6 will go on from the findings made in the course of chapter 5 and attempt to detect the possible functions and effects of the explicit and implicit references to diverse linguistic and cultural aspects which were found in the text corpus. This functional analysis will be supported by the voices of several of the authors themselves through selected extracts from interviews. Finally, chapter 7 will provide space for summarizing remarks and for drawing conclusions from the studies pursued.