

ARTICLES / SAGGI

A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF TRANSLATING DANTE'S *INFERNO* INTO ISIZULU: BALANCING CULTURAL ADAPTATION AND POETIC FIDELITY

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Sommario

*Questo articolo prende in esame l'intricato processo di traduzione dell'*Inferno* di Dante dalla versione inglese di Nichol (2014) all'isiZulu, una delle lingue sudafricane, basandosi su varie teorie della traduzione. Storicamente, la traduzione dell'*Inferno*, poema caratterizzato da complesse allegorie e da un ricco simbolismo, ha presentato notevoli sfide, in particolare nel mantenere i toni filosofici del poema rendendolo allo stesso tempo accessibile ai non italofoni. Questo articolo analizza le trasformazioni culturali e linguistiche necessarie per adattare l'*Inferno* ai parlanti isiZulu, concentrandosi sull'equilibrio tra traduzione semantica e traduzione comunicativa.*

Keywords: Culture, poetry, translation process, translation theories, reflexivity

Introduction

The translation of Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* from its original Italian into various languages represents a significant milestone in the cross-cultural dissemination of this seminal literary work. *Inferno*, the first part of Dante's Divine Comedy, is an allegorical journey through hell, laden with symbolic, philosophical, and theological nuances. Its

translations, especially into English, have multiplied over time, highlighting the universal appeal and enduring relevance of Dante's vision. As Altieri (1998:28) notes, English boasts the most translations of *Inferno*, underlining the linguistic and cultural challenges and complexities that translators have faced as readers from different languages an opportunity to "travel by a different road" as indicated in lines 91 to 96 below with an isiZulu translation:

English	IsiZulu
"Now you must travel by a different road," He answered when he saw that I was weeping, "If you wish to escape from this wild wood. This beast, the reason that you cry out loud, Will not let people pass along this way, But hinders them, and even has their blood."	"Manje kumele uhambe ngenye indlela," Waphendula lapho ebona ukuthi ngikhihla isililo, "Uma ufisa ukuphunyuka kuleli hlathi elesabekayo. Lesi silo, imbangela yokuba ukhihle isililo, Angeke sivumele abantu ukuba badlule ngale ndlela, Kepha siyabanqanda, futhi sigxaza igazi labo."

Table 1: Translation of lines 91-96 of *Inferno*

This paper analyses this addition of an isiZulu translation to the number of languages that honour the work of Dante, from J.G. Nicholas (2014) English translation, published by Alma Books. The Alma Books' website states that Nicholas, the Liverpool born poet and translator, is a renowned translator of Italian classics such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and Leopardi's *Canti*; and was awarded the Florio and Monselice Prizes for his great work¹. Given that he is an English native speaker, his translation resonated better with me as a second language speaker of English. In addition, his translation included the Italian source text which enabled me to verify the translation with the assistance of my colleagues who are native Italian speakers.

¹ See <https://almabooks.com/alma-author/j-g-nichols/>

The work analysed herein reflects on significant translational decisions, emphasising the *skopos* (intention of the text) of the original work while navigating the linguistic and cultural landscapes between the source and target texts. Key aspects of this paper include maintaining poetic forms, adapting cultural symbols, and the strategic use of domestication in lieu of foreignisation. This was deemed important in the production of a culturally significant text that speaks directly to the hearts and minds of its new audience.

Background: Translations of *Inferno*

The literary world has witnessed numerous translations of Dante's *Inferno*, originally penned in Italian. In instances where direct translation from Italian was unfeasible, intermediary translations have been employed such as in the isiZulu translation. Despite the inherent complexities and challenges faced by translators in conveying this allegorical journey — steeped in gloom, fear, and passion — into different languages, English stands out as the language with the most translations (Altieri, 1998:28).

The availability of many English translations enabled me, as a translator, to also embark on this journey of literary voyage through the translation from J.G. Nichols (2014). My inspiration in this translation project was fuelled by the warm reception of the work by South African students narrated in a book by Fanucchi and Virga (2021). These scholars assert the following:

[we] noticed that the *Commedia* affected South African students in a very personal and meaningful way and that our students responded to it passionately. They tended to see themselves reflected in Dante's epic journey through the after-world, and found themselves grappling with the challenges that the text poses to their political and ethical beliefs. It became very clear that Dante struck a note among our students, despite his text's cultural, temporal and linguistic distance from them. Many of them found themselves conversing with the text in the sense that they

transposed its language and imagery into the realm of their own experience, a process that involved both resisting and accepting Dante's vision. (Fanucchi & Virga, 2021:14)

The observed positive reception of Dante's vision among students engaged in a bilingual study of the *Divine Comedy* in Italian and English provides a compelling indicator of the narrative's enduring power. This narrative posits that linguistic mediation plays a crucial role in shaping the subjective interpretation of the epic by readers, thereby suggesting that the personal and emotional impact of the work may be substantially enhanced when readers engage with it in their native languages. According to Nelson Mandela (1995), language is key in communicating with others and comprehending them; one cannot convey their dreams and desires, understand their past, cherish their poetry, or enjoy their music if they do not completely understand the language they speak. Mandela is often quoted when expressing the importance of speaking to people in their home languages as that transports the message straight to their hearts (Ginsburgh & Weber, 2011). Translating *Inferno* to isiZulu facilitated the transportation of Dante's vision to a new community of readers.

Translation theories

In this comparative analysis of translated texts, the focus was on the challenges encountered during translation. This demanded dependence on translation theories and exploring different translation strategies to achieve the intended meaning of the original poem. My primary goal in this translation was to create a text that conveyed the message of the source text rather than the cultural context. In this paper, I reflect on the translation process taking into account the reflexive methods in translation, semantic translation and communicative translation.

• Reflexive methods in translation

Kadiu (2019) critically analysed the reflection process of the translation activity, drawing from Venuti (2018) who discussed the invisibility of the translator. Kadiu (2019) argues that reflection in translation is a way to showcase the journey taken by the translated work, emphasising the

status of the new text as a separate document and viewing it as an ethical act that exposes the cultural distinctions between the source text and the target text. Many translators of Dante's *Inferno* include annotations explaining translation decisions and sometimes apologising for not fully capturing the intended message due to the poet's artistry (Altieri, 1998). They make themselves visible as translators, informing the readers that the work they are reading is not the original document. They present issues that may have affected the cultural elements of the target culture and describe how they used various strategies, informed by translation theories and experiences, to create an adequate translation. Likewise, this paper analysed the translation through semantic and communicative translation theory by Newmark (1977).

- **Semantic translation vs communicative translation**

Building on theories of equivalence in translation, Peter Newmark (1977) discussed semantic translation and communicative translation, suggesting that translation studies should consider the impact of the text based on the methods used during translation. This involves deciding whether to prioritise loyalty to the source text or the target text.

Communicative translation aims to have a similar effect on readers as the original text. Semantic translation aims to convey the exact contextual meaning of the original text as closely as possible within the constraints of the second language (Budiman *et al.*, 2023:39).

Therefore, when translating using semantic translation, one should remain faithful to the source text and employ strategies that convey cultural elements and linguistic appropriateness, while placing the target text reader in a similar position to the reader of the source text, with the difference being the languages used. However, this strategy may result in the translated text sounding awkward or unfamiliar to the new reader due to foreign concepts. To address this issue, substitutes and explanations may be used in the translation.

On the other hand, when the translator utilises communicative translation strategies, their loyalty is to the reader of the target text.

They aim for the reader of the target text to understand the message from another language in a way that is relevant to their culture and language, eliminating any awkwardness or unfamiliarity that may come from the original language's culture. The primary focus of this approach is to satisfy the recipient, making sure that they grasp the intended message from the original author, but in their own cultural context. When a phenomenon does not exist in the target culture, the translator can replace that with a phenomenon that has the same attributes as the text even if it may be different. Thus, in the translation of *Inferno*, this approach of communicating the message to the target readers in their culture was adopted for culturally challenging aspects of the text. Budiman *et al.* (2023) contrast features of the communicative and semantic translation approaches.

Parameter	Semantic translation	Communicative translation
Transmitter/addressee focus	Focus on the thought processes of the transmitter as an individual; should only help TT reader with connotations if they are a crucial part of message	Subjective, TT reader focused, oriented towards a specific language and culture
Culture	Remains within the SL culture	Transfers foreign elements into the TL culture
Time and origin	Not fixed in any time or local space; translation needs to be done anew with every generation	Ephemeral and rooted in its own contemporary context
Relation to ST	Always 'inferior' to ST; 'loss' of meaning	May be 'better' than the ST, but overriding 'loyalty' to TL norms
Use of form of SL	If ST language norms deviate, then this must be replicated in TT; 'loyalty' to ST author	Respect for the form of the SL, but overriding 'loyalty' to TL norms
Form of TL	More complex, awkward, detailed, concentrated, tendency to overtranslate	Smoother, simpler, clearer, more direct, more conventional; tendency to undertranslate
Appropriateness	For serious literature autobiography, 'personal effusion' any important political (or other) statement	For the vast majority of texts, e.g., non-literary writing, technical and informative texts, publicity, standardized types, popular fiction
Criterion for evaluation	Accuracy of reproduction of the significance of ST	Accuracy of communication of ST message in TT

Figure 1: Newmark's semantic and communication translation (Budiman, 2023:40-41).

The translation of *Inferno* required careful consideration of factors influenced by translation, and decisions had to be made regarding the most suitable translation approach to use. According to Budiman *et al* (2023), translators have the flexibility to utilise multiple approaches based on the purpose of the target text. This reflective article examines

the translated text by evaluating each of the parameters identified in *Figure 1*.

Research methodology

This was a qualitative analysis of the translation, based on an interpretivist approach employed to studying the isiZulu translation of a culturally embedded poem that is situated in context. I present and compare different versions of the translation. I also explain the translation strategies that were informed by Newmark's translation theories, which were employed during the translation process leading to the final translation of Canto 1 of *Inferno* from Nichols' (2014) translation edition of the book into isiZulu.

Reflecting on the translation of *Inferno* into isiZulu

As previously stated, the main purpose of the translated text is to introduce readers to Dante's presentation of hell through his poetic encounter. The evaluation of this translation is carried out using parameters presented by Budiman *et al* (2023) in *Figure 1* to wit the use of form, addressee and culture.

a. Use of form of the source language: Translation with the intention of maintaining rhymes

Rhyme is a crucial element in poetry, therefore, this section examines the use of rhymes in the original text and how this influenced the translation process leading to the recreation of rhymes in the translated versions (Translation A and Translation B).

(i) Translation A

Halfway along our journey to life's end I found myself astray in a dark wood, Since the right way was nowhere to be found.	Eminyakeni yami yobunsizwa umoya usahlangene nenyama Ngazithola ngidukele ehlathini elimnyama Indlela eyiyonayona yayifiphaliswe yibo lobo
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How hard a thing it is to express the horror Of that wild wood, so difficult, so dense! Even to think of it renews my terror.	bumnyama. Ngiswele amagama okuchaza okwangithuthumelisa Kulelo hlathi elesabekayo, kunjima, kuhlasimulisa! Nokulicabanga nje kuyangiqhaq hazelisa.
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(ii) Translation B

Halfway along our journey to life's end I found myself astray in a dark wood, Since the right way was nowhere to be found. How hard a thing it is to express the horror Of that wild wood, so difficult, so dense! Even to think of it renews my terror.	Maphakathi nobude bempilo ngibheke esiphethweni Ngazithola ngidukele ehlathini elimnyama, Indlela eyiyonayona ibifiphele Ngiswele amagama okuchaza lobu bunzima Behlathi elisabekayo, elinobunzima, eliminyene! Nokulicabanga nje kuhlasimulisa umzimba kabusha.
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The words “*nenyama*” (with the flesh), “*elimnyama*” (that is dark), and “*bumnyama*” (darkness) rhyme. The translation incorporated the use of an isiZulu idiom used to refer to being alive, which is “*umphefumulo/umoya usahlanganene nenyama*” (while the spirit is still intact with the flesh) leading to a full translation of line 1 in (i) as “In the years of manhood while my flesh was still intact with my flesh,” instead of “*Maphakathi nobude bempilo ngibheke esiphethweni*” (in the middle of the long life heading towards the end) found in line 1 of (ii). The use of an idiomatic expression in lieu of the more direct translation was to evoke an idiomatic effect that would rhyme with the next two lines as per the Italian text structure. The sentence structure of isiZulu captured this effect succinctly as the noun comes before the adjective, leading to “*ehlathini elimnyama*” (in the dark forest) which naturally created

another rhyme in line 2 of (i) although not for (ii). In line 3, in (i) I opted to continue with the theme of darkness to help maintain the rhyme as “The right way was hidden by that darkness,” instead of “The right way was hidden” in (ii). I added “*ubumnyama*” (darkness) to create a rhyme yet maintaining meaning.

Newmark in Budiman *et al* (2023), when referring to the form of the source language, says that the translator should respect the norms of the source language while maintaining those of the target language. Alwanza (2014) provides opposing views in this respect, stating that some scholars emphasise the retention of form and content of the source text and produce a translation that will be loyal to the source text even if the produced text will be foreign to readers; on the other hand, other if translators adopt Venuti’s (2018) domestication, the translated texts lean more towards the target reader at the expense of the source text. The latter leads to a production of a text that is aligned with cultural norms of the target language and satisfies the function of the translated text and is less foreign to target readers.

b. Addressee: Foreignisation vs Domestication

Newmark gives translators the option of either maintaining the translated text’s fidelity to the interpretation of the source text reader and translating it literally with the addition of annotations to clarify the connotations of the text. Alternatively, they can choose to eliminate the foreign elements of the text and adapt it to the cultural context of the target text reader, allowing them to understand the information without reference to the original text’s environment. I analyse the translation of the text using both foreignisation and domestication strategies adopted by translators.

(i) Foreignisation

He answered: “Not a man, though I was once. Both of my parents came from Lombardy, And both of them were native Mantuan’s.	Waphendula: “Angisiyo indoda, nakuba ngake ngaba yiyo. Abazali bami babengabaseLombardy, Bobabili babezalelwe eMantua.
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I came to birth sub Julio, rather late, And lived in Rome under the good Augustus When false, deceptive gods still held their state."	Mina ngazalwa kubusa uJulio, selishonile ilanga, Ngahlala eRome ngaphansi kuka-Augustus olungileyo Lapho kusabusa onkulunkulu abalahlekisayo."
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(ii) Domestication

He answered: "Not a man, though I was once. Both of my parents came from Lombardy, And both of them were native Mantuan's. I came to birth sub Julio, rather late, And lived in Rome under the good Augustus When false, deceptive gods still held their state."	Waphendula: "Umuntu – qha nakanye, nakuba ngake ngaba ngumuntu. Abazali bami babengabakwaZulu, BengamaZulu ngokuzalwa. Ngazalwa kusabusa uCetshwayo kaMpande, sebengincamile. Ngahlala oLundi ngaphansi kwesandla sayo belu Inyathi kaNdaba Ngenkathi kusabusa namadlozi angabakhohlisi."
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In (i), the names Lombardy, Mantuan's, sub Julio, Rome, Augustus, gods may be unfamiliar to the target readers because of their contextual meaning aimed by the poet and the foreign setting of the text. In (ii), these words are translated with functional concepts chosen from South African history, and gods is substituted with *amadlozi* (ancestors) as it is a significant aspect of the target language culture. When making this comparison, I pair each foreign word from (i) with a corresponding word from (ii).

Source text	Foreignisation	Domestication
Lombardy	eLombardy (in Lombardy)	babengabakwaZulu (from the Zulu nation)
Mantuan	eMantuan (in Mantuan)	KwaZulu (in Zululand)
Julio	uJulio (Julio)	Zulu kaMalandela (Zulu son of Malandela)
Augustus	u-Augustus (Augustus)	Inkosi uCetshwayo kaMpande (King Cetshwayo son of Mpande)
Gods	Onkulunkulu (gods)	Amadlozi (Ancestors)

Table 2: Foreignisation and domestication in the translation of Dante's *Canto 1* to isiZulu

Virgil claims he was born during the time of Julius Caesar (sub-Julio) as Caesar, which according to Wigodsky (1975) does not necessarily refer to Dante's birth date but to a period when Virgil, Dante's favourite poet, was born. Wigodky suggests that the interpretation of sub-Julio would be better understood if worded differently and paraphrases it as follows:

I was born sub Julio – you know that it was Pompeio et Crasso consulibus, but I say sub Julio, even though he was late to take the place beside and above the other two for which Heaven intended him, and it is by virtue of this intention that I call that entire time sub Julio (Wigodky, 1975:181-2).

It is important to state that this paper does not delve the period referred to in the text as sub-Julio but acknowledges the historical importance of this period in the poet's life which should also resonate in the

translation. Sub Julio existed long before the recorded times of the Zulu nation, therefore, finding a suitable replacement for Julius Caesar was a challenge. I eventually decided to replace him with Cetshwayo kaMpande, who was the fourteenth Zulu king according to Mazisi Kunene (2017).

The original text also mentions Augustus, who was the first noble emperor of Rome. In the translation, I substituted Rome with uLundi, where king Cetshwayo ruled and later all the official states of the province were conducted historically. This choice was made to highlight the history of the country making the text more relatable to readers; just like the substitution of “gods” with “*amadlozi*” (ancestors). Historically, the Zulu nation paid homage to their ancestors rather than multiple gods, as seen in other parts of the world. This modification aimed to accurately reflect the Zulu cultural beliefs and practices.

The final translated text was adjusted following Venuti's domestication strategy, as mentioned earlier. By making certain decisions in the translation process, I aimed to immerse the readers in a setting that they could easily relate to without needing further explanation of the context. This approach aligns with a concept by Newmark discussed by Budeman *et al* (2023) of semantic translation, which allows for flexibility in adapting the text to suit the contemporary audience while retaining its cultural and historical roots.

The translation of this historical text was guided by the goal of ensuring that readers could connect with the content on a personal and cultural level. By localising the poet to the South African context and referencing familiar figures and places, I strived to make the text more accessible and engaging for the target audience.

c. Culture: Symbolism

In the text, Dante mentions three beasts that he encountered: the leopard, the she-wolf, and the lion. Translating the names of these animals presented challenges due to the different characteristics described by Dante, which are not typical in an African context. For animals that are not native to South Africa, I translated them by replacing them with locally available animals. When naming these beasts, I included their characteristics to evoke the descriptions provided in the original text, as follows:

- (i) leopard – ingwe enguNonkanuko (BT: a leopard called Lust)
- (ii) lion – ingonyama enguZigqajile (BT: a lion called Pride)
- (iii) she-wolf – uMonase oyimpungushe (BT: a jackal named Greed)

The three beasts have been studied by many scholars but for this paper, I used the explanation from Chona and Adlawan (2018).

The three beasts symbolized sins and temptations; the lion is an image of ferocity and violence but it symbolizes pride, the leopard symbolizes lust and the she-wolf symbolizes avarice or cupidity (Chona & Adlawan, 2018: 1016).

In the African context, a lion is known to be brave, courageous, and strong. It is seen as the top of the food chain and is often associated with pride due to its hierarchical position in the savannah. In African folktales, the focus is on the lion's bravery and strength rather than its pride as depicted by Dante. Therefore, the characteristics from the source text were used as the name for the lion in order to preserve the characteristics depicted by the poet. The same approach was taken in translating the leopard, which is also viewed as mighty (though to a lesser extent than the lion) and known for its spots, rather than lust.

Translating the she-wolf posed a challenge as this animal is not native to Africa. Since the poem is set in an African context, I needed to choose animals that are found in Africa to avoid creating a strange text with animals that the target readership is less familiar with. Therefore, the she-wolf was translated to a jackal as it is associated with greed as is the intention of the context. Another option could have been to follow the established example of Bible translations for 'wolf' to a 'hyena' as will be shown later in the next section of this paper but this was not followed because of the *skopos* of the text. This cultural substitution was necessary to make the text more accessible and relatable to the target audience. Additionally, I incorporated the characteristic of greediness from the source text, as hyenas are often depicted as cheeky and cunning in African culture.

It is important to preserve the characteristics of the animals as they represent the seven sins in Dante's work. By maintaining these

characteristics, the intended message of the source text is preserved and readers can better understand the symbolism behind these animals. Simply translating the names of the animals without considering their characteristics would have hindered the reader's understanding and led to misinterpretation based on their own cultural knowledge.

Discussion

IsiZulu poetry encapsulates rhythm, and rhyming is one of the strategies for capturing a rhythmic effect in literature. Sibisi and Tappe (2020) state that poetry captures and engages readers with all aspects of African life as perceived by the poet. In their study on the use of contemporary poetry in isiZulu as a tool to enhance access to academic content, they added that "rhythm and movement were seen as alluring to students and helpful for capturing and holding their attention" (Sibisi & Tappe, 2020:30). Similarly, in translation, even when the English source text does not rhyme, capturing the African rhythm found in poetry can engage the reader from the first line. The absence of rhythm in the source language form does not hinder the translator from incorporating rhythm commonly found in literature written in the target language, without deviating from the information conveyed by the foreign text.

Translators must employ the most adequate strategies in translation, placing the target addressee in mind. These strategies include choosing between domesticating and foreignising the translated text. Venuti (2018) characterises foreignisation as a translation approach that purposefully maintains the distinct linguistic and cultural elements of the original text, thereby immersing the reader in a foreign context. Conversely, domestication involves a translation method that conforms the original text to the target language's cultural norms, making it more accessible and familiar for the reader. Put simply, when domesticating, the translator decides substitute parts of the source text with parts found in the natural environment of the target reader, and when foreignising the text, translates with the intention of retaining source text concepts in their original form but in a different language, teaching the target reader about the world from which the source text originates by including foreign concepts.

The origination of the text from Italy which is miles away from South Africa, and the historical differences that exist between the two countries demanded the use of accommodative translation strategies to facilitate communication across these nations. Domesticating through changing foreign names of people, places, animals, towns and cultural practices was necessary to build a connection with the reader and arouse further interest in learning more about the poet's encounters in hell.

Another important feature in this translation was the use of symbolism based on animals where Dante refers to the three beasts he met. As already stated, this symbolism was in reference to the seven deadly sins. In Canto 1, he meets three animals or beasts — the leopard, lion and a she-wolf — which are understood differently in the African context; in the case of the she-wolf, it is non-existent. Translators must employ various strategies to mitigate cultural gaps that exist in literary translation.

This strategy involves replacing a culture-specific item or expression with a target-language item which does not have the same propositional meaning but is likely to have a similar impact on the target reader (Baker, 2011:29).

For instance, in the case of the she-wolf, it was replaced by a jackal in the translation while the English text has the animal 'wolf'. Despite 'wolves' and 'jackals' referring to different animals, certain characteristics that they share warrant the substitution of one with the other within the cultural context. Thus, the translator's duty is to find a meeting point that does not alienate the target reader while ensuring that the intended meaning is conveyed across cultures. There are no wolves in South Africa, and to counter this and to remove the foreignness of the text to the target audience, bible translators considered the *skopos* of the biblical metaphorical use of 'wolf' as a predator (Jesse, 2000). This metaphorical use of hyena in African folklore also includes cunning predatory traits (Crandall, 2002). However, in this translation, I shifted away from the 'hyena' translation because of the intention of the source text which was to portray the wolf as greedy rather than its predatory traits. To this end, I replaced it with a 'jackal' which in African folktales is often associated with greed (Stewart, 2004). As much as the word 'wolf' is translated differently in different texts, the

skopos of both texts was to convey the characteristics rather than the animal species. As Verhovtsova (2023) defines cultural translation, it involves conveying elements of the source text to the target language within the constraints of the target language. This entails employing strategies that make the translation accessible to the target reader while still faithfully representing the original author's intent.

Thus, translators must navigate the delicate balance between maintaining the integrity of the source text and making it resonate within the cultural context of the target audience. The choice between domestication and foreignisation depends on various factors, including the purpose of the translation, the nature of the source text, and the cultural distance between the source and target languages. By employing these strategies thoughtfully, translators not only bridge linguistic divides but also foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse literary traditions.

Conclusion

The translation of Dante's *Inferno* into isiZulu presents a unique and challenging endeavour that simultaneously bridges and highlights cultural, temporal, and linguistic differences. This reflective paper delves into the intricate process and decisions involved in this task, drawing from well-established translation theories and methods, such as those forwarded by Newmark (1977), Venuti (1995), and Baker (2011). A multitude of approaches of communicative translation and domestication were employed judiciously to ensure that the translated text not only remains faithful to Dante's original vision but also resonates with the cultural and linguistic contexts of South African readers.

Choices to employ rhythm and rhyme within isiZulu poetry, the substitution of culturally significant names and places, and the adaptation of symbolic elements such as the three beasts demonstrate the translator's effort to both capture and convey the essence of Dante's epic in a manner that is accessible and relatable to the target audience. This maintains the delicate balance between preserving the source text's integrity and making it comprehensible and meaningful within the context of the target culture.

The historical and cultural adaptations seen in the translation point to a broader understanding that translation is not simply a linguistic exercise but a cultural and ethical act that strives to make complex texts accessible without losing their core message. It emphasises the importance of context, both cultural and historical, in the translation process and the significant role of the translator as a mediator between worlds. Ultimately, the translation of *Inferno* into isiZulu not only enriches the literary landscape of South Africa but also provides a unique opportunity for readers to engage with Dante's timeless themes through the lens of their cultural heritage. The combined use of reflexive methods, semantic and communicative translation strategies, and culturally sensitive adaptations demonstrates that translation is a dynamic and evolving practice aimed at fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

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I NERI BIANCHI: REPRESENTATIONS OF ITALIAN PRISONERS OF WAR TROUBLING RACIAL IDENTITY

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Sommario

*I quasi 100 000 prigionieri di guerra italiani sparsi per il Sudafrica durante e dopo la Seconda Guerra Mondiale rappresentano un prolungato e significativo incontro tra sudafricani e italiani. Gli italiani sconvolsero e sovvertirono categorie razziali già consolidate nel paese. Questo articolo ripercorre i punti di rottura nella memoria e nell'immaginario pubblico degli ex prigionieri di guerra italiani (IPOW) in Sudafrica in un momento particolare della storia sudafricana, la fine degli anni '80. Presentiamo un contrappunto alle narrazioni più comuni sulla categoria razziale del "bianco", offrendo una attenta lettura dell'assoggettamento degli IPOW a vite razzializzate in Sudafrica attraverso l'analisi dell'episodio "I Neri Bianchi" all'interno del documentario *Cattivi Italiani in Sud Africa (1941-1947)* (Moni 1989). L'esperienza dell'identità politica e visiva nera, sovrapposta a categorizzazioni regionali e di classe già complesse, rende l'esperienza di questi prigionieri di guerra uno studio unico nel contesto razziale della metà del XX secolo. A livello teorico, l'articolo attinge agli studi sull'identità bianca e sull'identità italiana per considerare l'incontro tra sudafricani bianchi e prigionieri di guerra italiani e la conseguente definizione dell'identità bianca prima dell'entrata in vigore del razzismo istituzionalizzato. Nell'articolo, sosteniamo che il modo in cui i prigionieri di guerra italiani percepivano la propria identità bianca fosse prevalentemente influenzato dal loro senso di "italianità" e che questo fu elemento di disturbo verso i modi consolidati di rappresentare l'identità bianca in Sudafrica all'epoca. Questa complicità per l'identità bianca (costruita lungo le linee delle etnie culturali inglese e afrikaans) viene presentata nel contesto del Sudafrica degli anni '80. Nell'articolo, consideriamo quali furono le implicazioni in quel periodo.*

Keywords: Whiteness, Italian Prisoners of War, South African history, Apartheid history, World War II

Introduction

We read an episode of the multi-part documentary, *Captivi Italici in Sud Africa (1941-1947)* directed by Steve Moni as evidence of multiple and changing experiences of the racial categorisation of Italian Prisoners of War (IPOWs) and whiteness in South Africa. As such, we consider two interconnected contexts and timeframes. The first is that of the IPOWs in South Africa and the second explores race and racialisation practices in South Africa. The documentary refers to the 1940s as remembered by Italian-South Africans, during the 1980s in South Africa. We focus on part three of the documentary which expounds on discussions of race explicitly and utilises these two historical backgrounds to map and analyse the discursive constructs of racial categorisation and whiteness.

IPOWs in South Africa

Allied troops in North Africa were obliged to take custody of the POWs that surrendered to them in their own country. Following brutal transit camps in North Africa, regarding which IPOWs relate their treatment in cramped holding pens, the Italians captured by South African troops were shipped down the east coast of the continent to South Africa (Sani, 1992:297). From Durban they went by rail to Zonderwater (“Without Water”) some fifty kilometers north of Pretoria. Initially, they lived in tented camps, where many died from lightning strikes to the mineral-rich earth below and eventually an IPOW town was built that housed 90,000 prisoners, the largest Allied-run camp in the Southern Hemisphere. Conditions improved steadily as local South African Italians began to help, and a sympathetic commander Col. Prinsloo (who had been in a British-run concentration camp as a child during the Second Boer War) held the camp to very high standards in line with the Geneva Convention. He determined to make it a model camp (298-299).

Following the shift in allegiance of Italy during the war, IPOWs were permitted to work at external work camps and farms. Many did so, and their encounter with the daily life of South Africans was at its most intimate. After the war many IPOWs went into hiding to escape compulsory repatriation, which only ended in 1947, and hoped to naturalise in South Africa. Others applied for citizenship in the face of resistance from the post-war Afrikaner Nationalist government, wary as it was of an influx of Catholic and potentially communist Italians (Sani, 1992:308-315)¹.

Decades later, the filmmaker, Stephen Moni, an Italian-South African contended with the expectations and contradictions of race during Apartheid. In his youth, Moni was part of the first interracial South African punk band, 'National Wake', which produced music in the late 1970s and early 1980s – often coming right up against the apartheid machinery. The band gained some notoriety and was very up-front in its anti-apartheid stance². Racial categorisation was a cornerstone of Apartheid South African ideology and legislation. This categorisation began in the colonial period and was adapted and repurposed through successive regimes of white social, economic and political domination, culminating in the total legislation of South African lives along racial lines in a raft of laws passed between 1950 and their gradual dismantling in the 1980s³. These laws drew on long-

¹ Key works dealing with the overall historiography of the IPOWs in South Africa are Gazzini's 1987 first-hand "Zonderwater: *I prigionieri in Sud Africa* (1941-1947)", Sani's (1992) *History of the Italians in South Africa 1489-1989* reflects on the place of Italians in South African history generally. In the latter, the IPOW experience forms an important part. Scholarly works include Milanese's dissertation on letters from the camps and their relation to Italian identity more broadly (2002) and Horn's dissertation (2012) and subsequent focus on the first years of the Zonderwater Camp (2022).

² The two black members, Gary and Punka Khoza have died, victims of mental health issues and AIDS pandemic respectively. Both white members emigrated, and the story of the band is largely untold, mainly because of the pressure that fractured them and the subsequent social conditions that scattered them (Petridis 2013). Nevertheless, it had a brief resurgence in interest following the *Punk in Africa* documentary (Maas and Jones 2012). Prior to National Wake Moni was in the less well-known but influential Safari Suits, a new-wave punk band based in Cape Town. His work as documentary filmmaker has focused on the social and historical contexts of South African lives, with a recent documentary edit of *This is National Wake* (2022) returning to his time as punk musician in late apartheid.

³ Apartheid legislation was built on extant colonial laws. The shift from cultural segregation to legislated "separate development" is discernible in changes in focus for racist legislation from about 1950; from land and labour to education, miscegenation, legal rights and amenities. This, along with the continuing stranglehold on land rights and labour made for an all-

standing social practices of racial separation entrenched in the cultures of the two dominant white linguistic/cultural groups in South Africa: namely English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking. White South Africa, though aligned on general principles on the place of 'natives' in the South African social landscape, was deeply divided by the question of South Africa's place in the Second World War, with the English-speaking faction firmly in support of the Empire, and the Afrikaans-speaking divided between those who aligned with empire as a cipher for progress and modernity and those who felt that an emerging republic, founded on Afrikaner agrarian culture, was best served by staying out of the war. An alternative was aligning with its closer ethnic, nationalist parallel in Nazi Germany, who were also resisting Britain (see Simpson, 2022).

Whiteness and Italian Ethnicity in South Africa

We suggest that social experiences of race in South Africa, particularly experiences of 'whiteness' were troubled, at least temporarily, by IPOWs. Their presence in South Africa's regime of whiteness and its insistence on policing the boundaries of race meant that the very categories of race were continuously called into question – see the discussion of *italianità* below.

The self-image of *italiani brava gente* claims the intrinsic goodness of the Italian people. A myth built following Italy's failed colonial enterprises and compounded following the defeat of Fascism after WWII, Favero (2010) argues that the self-image of the *italiani brava gente* is central to the construction of modern Italian identity and functions ideologically to "reformulate and then set aside disquieting moments of national shame" (2010:140).

The racialisation of immigrant communities into whiteness has been the subject of Italian American studies (Luconi, 2011; Guglielmo & Salerno, 2003; Alba, 1985). The focus of identity politics in this scholarship includes the consideration of how Italian immigrants were re-ethnicised as part of their experience within America. There is also literature that suggests the contrary, focused on how projecting and achieving the status of white identity is "a rite of passage by which,

pervasive separation and systematic oppression of people in "non-white" racial categories. See "Apartheid Legislation 1850s-1970s" at *South African History Online*.

besides Americanizing themselves, Caucasian immigrant groups undertake a racist route" (Lipsitz, 1998, cited in Luconi, 2011:152).

In the South African context, Marchetti-Mercer and Virga have more recently discussed the Italian diaspora and their identities within the country (2021, 2023). The authors focus on the complexity of Italian diasporas in South Africa, focused on third generations of descendants of Italian immigrants, and how their Italian identity is shaped through nostalgia, as they navigate belonging. The authors work with the concept of *italianità* to explore the ethnic identity of their research participants.

Italianità, according to Marchetti-Mercer and Virga, "refers to a culturally and historically constructed and changeable concept, fluid and ambiguous by nature [...] it is influenced by social and political events in Italy, but, for Italians living abroad, also by social and political events in the destination country" (2023:25-26). This use of the term is significant in our understanding of how the ex-IPOWs reminisce about their experiences of white South Africa in the documentary.

The documentary was released in Italian in 1989. In that year the apartheid state was under constant guerilla attack in major cities and small towns, with limpet and car bombs an almost weekly occurrence across 1988 and 1989. The South African Border War (1966-1989) was winding down but mired in the complexity of the South African extrication from the then Southwest Africa. International sanctions were still exerting immense economic pressure in South Africa. Our close reading follows the themes that emerge in part three of the documentary.

Stella Bruzzi (2006) notes that documentaries are not passive representations of truth but are instead active, ever-changing narrative constructions that are shaped by performative choices of their creators and subjects. As such they reflect the inherent subjectivity of storytelling, where the act of documentation itself becomes a performance of sorts that continuously shifts and adapts. We consider the layering of interview testimony, narrative context, and the affective framing of the soundtrack – utilising the concepts and approaches to cultural ethnicity described above as our critical framework.

According to Bruzzi (6-7), documentary film exists in a state of productive tension. On the one side is the filmmaker's desire to capture and present absolute truth or reality. On the other side is the

fundamental impossibility of ever achieving that pure objectivity. Rather than seeing this as a failure, Bruzzi suggests this tension is actually what defines the form and its generative capacities. We see this dialectical tension evidenced in the distance in time from the subject matter of the IPOWS in South Africa and the attempts at revisiting and understanding this period by the filmmaker.

I Neri Bianchi⁴

Every episode of the series begins with an establishing shot of the stone facade of the church built by IPOWs on the outskirts of Pietermaritzburg, in what is now KwaZulu-Natal. This is followed by a medium shot of the classical pediment and its Latin inscription to Mother Mary from the Italian captives AD 1944. "*Captivi Italici*" gives its name to the series and the combination in this shot of the church that is humble in scale but dignified with classical references and proportions, along with a few bars of stately, restrained string orchestration, sets the tone of the series: a respectful portrait of dignified men. This is a well-used documentary film strategy, to present a world as complete and resolved, and then, through deeper investigation, to show that things are not always what they seem and have not always been so.

Bill Nichols (2017) identified various paradigms for classifying documentaries which have been refined in recent years. This documentary can be read as both expository and participatory; expository documentaries are characterised by ethical concerns related to historical accuracy and verifiability, classic oration aiming to inform and move the audience through the use of the voice-over, and sound that tends towards being expressive and cognitive and fully controlled by the filmmaker (108). Participatory documentary modes include a dialectical engagement between the filmmaker and the subject in this instance through the investment in the encounter of the interview (109).

The format of this Italian language documentary is conversational, with ex-IPOWs and South African interviewees in informal settings,

⁴ The documentary is available in its entirety from the Dante Alighieri Society Johannesburg. Our thanks to Steve Moni for providing us with a Master copy of the work to analyse. Our thanks also to Claudia Dallabona, who gave so generously of her time to discuss translations of the work.

sometimes in the places where the events discussed took place. They respond to an off-camera interviewer, and the candid, sometimes confessional tone of the interviews is often a result of protracted interviews where they are put at ease. Many are smoking, having a glass of wine, in their homes, kitchens, libraries or places of work. Others are gathered for lunch, or in a club room, and a few are at the places where they worked or lived during internment. A disembodied narrator links the edited sections of interview material, providing context for each part of the conversation. The viewer does not hear the questions asked.

The other three parts of the series present aspects of the IPOW experience that, while interesting in themselves, do not come close to the candour in the third part, where the discomfort of how an enemy national and prisoner of war becomes a co-national is explored⁵. From the largely middle-class affluence of their current positions, they remember a time when they were not necessarily welcome. Structurally then, the documentary develops a dialectical tension (Bruzzi, 2006) through interspersed cuts between interviews conducting in the 1980s, archival footage, ambient soundtrack with affective qualities and the use of the voice-over narration to fill in the gaps in historical time and to provide context.

Two threads run through the hour-long episode, the one explores the developing closeness between those imprisoned for refusing to recant fascism, and who were moved to a camp for officers of rank in *Koffiefontein* (in the then Orange Free State), where they shared clandestine communications with Nazi-sympathisers and Afrikaner

⁵ The documentary *Captivi Italici in Sud Africa (1941-1947), un documentario in quattro parti* (Moni 1989) presents a four-part chronology of the IPOW experience from capture in North Africa and transport to South Africa (*Prima parte, Prigionieri del sud*), through to the formation of the "City of the Prisoner" (*Seconda parte, Città del prigioniero*). The third and fourth parts explore the life of the prisoners in South Africa. The third part, explores the IPOWs status as cheap labour, bringing them into the context of racialised work in South Africa (*Terza parte, I neri bianchi*). The final section speaks to the rapprochement of the IPOWs with nascent Afrikaner Nationalism: in part through proximity on the farms in the hinterland, and in part through alignment with a fiercely anti-British faction of Afrikaner nationalism (*Quarta parte, I boeri italiani*). The amity developed at this late stage of the war laid the groundwork for post-war sympathy for Italian immigration in the face of official resistance of the apartheid state to the prospect of the *roomse gevaar* (the Catholic/communist danger) presented by repatriated IPOWs wishing to return to South Africa as immigrants. Our focus is the "white blacks" literally working themselves out of racial marginalisation at the bottom rung of the pre-Apartheid racial categorisation system.

nationalists in adjacent camps. These hardline fascists established close ties with those who would emerge as founders of Apartheid post-war, and with the *Ossewabrandwag*. This relationship is discussed in the first part of the episode⁶.

The second thread follows those Italians who moved out of the camps into South African society and had to find ways to integrate and survive. In so doing they became enmeshed in the racial political norms of the day, unknowingly setting themselves up for life in South Africa after the war.

Each of the ex-IPOWs interviewed, barring Mario Gazzini, was a permanent resident in South Africa at the time of the documentary; among the 800 or so men who returned or went to ground after the war and re-emerged as South African citizens when they were permitted to do so. Below we trace this thread in the documentary, surfacing, the articulations of race and sex in the IPOW experience.

Choices after Capitulation

Following the opening sequence, this third part of the documentary begins with a wide-angle tracking shot of the open highveld on a clear summer's day, presumably shot from the train route that historically formed the main transport to Zonderwater Prisoner of War Camp. The low shrubland and red earth are offset against a cobalt sky. Across the backdrop, the legend "*25 luglio 1943*" appears. The soundtrack is the tuning into the radio broadcast of capitulation of the Italian government, and the fall of fascism in Italy. The sound is distorted and filled with static interference, the moment is being retrieved in the sound, we must tune in to understand. The juxtaposition with an ostensibly empty landscape infers these worlds coming together for the viewer, the IPOW experience inscribed on a landscape.

We then see Vittorio Giachetti, an ex-president of the IPOW association (The Zonderwater Block Association), read from his diary of the day, surrounded by Zonderwater memorabilia in his home. The domestic and comfortable setting signifies a further dislocation in time and space from that train trip. The viewer holds the aural and visual image of the 1940s as well as the comfort of peacetime in the domestic

⁶ The *Ossewabrandwag* was a pro-Nazi Afrikaner Nationalist organisation founded at the beginning of World War II.

setting. Of course, at the time South Africa was anything but peaceful, the state of emergency raging around the viewers.

Giachetti embodies the staid and comfortable veteran at a distance in time and space that has provided an ordering of his thoughts, reflections on his diary and the past narrativised. He narrates his diary over images of newsreel footage (*Cinegiornale Luce*) of the Badoglio government being established and the stripping of fascist paraphernalia from buildings. The documentary steers clear of the gratuity of Mussolini's execution and the spectacle of the Piazzale Loreto hanging, and this is in line with an aesthetic that sees violence through artistic renderings from the time, underscored with aggressive soundtrack and quick cuts between images.

The next shot returns to tracking across the veld and the broadcast of "8 settembre 1943" imploring Italians to cooperate. The title shot "*I Neri Bianchi*" shows after a fade to black, with a dramatic synthesizer sting. After the formal context given by a historian, we move to Mario Gazzini, on a rooftop in Rome, surrounded by sheaves of dishevelled papers held down by paperweights, cigarette in his hands and the dapper comportment of the chronicler of his fellow IPOWs in South Africa. He makes it clear that some people changed, and some did not, and we learn that people do not change flags and opinions quickly. Those who did not were separated from their fellow IPOWs and placed in Block 8 at Zonderwater, the main internment camp in Cullinan east of Pretoria.

The film cuts to ex-IPOW Orio Turilli from behind the counter of his retail store where he offers the pragmatic view that one had to look after one's own skin, all became "egotists" in the process of choosing how to behave following Italy's change of allegiance in the war. His is a middle-class comfort, standing behind his store cashier counter, he is a master of his environment and a portrait of respectability.

An interviewee states that prisoners were offered a form to complete, in which they recant their allegiance to fascism, a prerequisite to being allowed to work in external camps for some pay. All those who went out to work signed this document, Duilio de Franceschi states clearly that there was a question of principle, and so those who did not sign, himself included, were labelled fascists. He is seated in a media-rich home office, with framed newspaper clippings, photos, and leather-bound volumes. Cravat and silk shirt, he is a picture of learned urbanity. His is a highly curated, ordered, and controlled space; an

internal world of confidence which contrasts well with the fluid desk of Gazzini we met earlier in the episode and his sense of the vast grey areas of political allegiance. Two kinds of respectability emerge in the episode that looks back at a time of chaos: one politically diplomatic, the other avowed, both having processed the experience to some extent. The latitude provided by the *brava gente* concept allows both these opinions to appear seamlessly in this scene, with little apparent contradiction.

Gazzini and de Franceschi offer two points along the spectrum of post-war identity. For Gazzini, there is a complex picture of the individual IPOW's inner conviction, and the practicalities of survival. This reflection as he looks out from a vantage point over rooftops in the Rome, in an Italy that is reaping the postwar 'miracle' of growth and reconstruction. For de Franceschi, settled in the Apartheid state, that though fragile, had provided a post-war life for him, it is possible to declare his principles of loyalty to an Italy whose extreme nationalism is echoed in the state that he settled in post-war.

With the offer to collaborate and help in activities other than war-related ones, the IPOWs had an opportunity to earn some money and get out of the camps. Giustino Iacovitti (who mentions the *brava gente* concept here in his description of white South Africans) and Ugo Spetto speak of the general amiability of South Africans as people, politics aside, and the considerations of earning some money for their families back home.

In the opening moments of this section the documentary makes the impact of global geopolitics come to bear on the lives of individual men, their hopes and frustrations, their politics and education all come into play as they decide to change sides in the war and help to build a foreign country with their labour, or to remain true to the principles of Italian Fascism and wait out the war in South Africa. Spetto recalls the threats of fellow prisoners to those who betrayed Italy, and de Franceschi recalls those who went out to work being called sellouts.

The last word on this moment of decision is given to the brusque and smoky voice of Giuseppe Pulvirenti, whose Sicilian dialect is given Italian subtitles. He bluntly recalls that after forming two lines of those who did and did not want to go out of the camp, the latter were beaten up by five South African police. He is in his kitchen, with a silent consigliere chain-smoking. Pulvirenti does all the talking and the other

man who is silent, there to cross-check and offer verification, is never named. He is anonymous and has chosen to be in the shot. The ominous soundtrack begins when Pulvirenti starts talking about violence. His is the only interview given subtitles in Italian, his dialect and to some extent the content he relates, quite unflinching and unflattering to both South Africans and Italians, makes him the cultural outsider. His is the last word in the documentary to which we will return later.

The next scenes stand as an editorial juxtaposition that frames the question of allegiance. In a brief foreboding sequence, hand-made fascist propaganda produced in the camp is presented to camera by Vittorio Giachetti, bound in a volume he “jealously guards”, these polished and highly designed art deco images are edited with scenes of violence painted in the camp in expressionist oils (probably by a IPOW artist named Sdoya). The soundtrack underscores violence with a brooding and aggressive synthesizer, with sounds of rushing and discordance. On-screen these images infer a backdrop of the ominous and ever-present context of fascism in the camps and lives of IPOWs. This sequence sets the context for the next conversation and its articulation of decisions following capitulation.

The documentary cuts back to the next scene filled with sunlight, on the train to Zonderwater with Giacchetti, de Franceschi and Ernesto Colombo. They have a heated exchange about the eradication of fascist history from Italian history and that so much blood was spilled between Italians in the camp on this account. There is a coded agreement, between these three at least, that the capitulation was a mistake and the implication that the fascist project should have continued, Giacchetti says: “I already rebelled at the time”. No one openly says that they are now avowed fascists though. It is left at that.

On a train, with little glasses of wine in hand and the bleak, seemingly unchanged landscape rushing by, we are transported back to Zonderwater, with prisoners who, because of their allegiance, we can imagine stayed within the camp. There is a shot of the tracks from the back of the train and the narrator gives some exposition about the politicisation of the IPOW question, the confusion about where they fit in is taken outside of internal Italian politics.

Historian Noel Garson is introduced and relates the concern that German, Italian and Afrikaner nationalist prisoners, particularly those of the *Ossewabrandwag*, would create a problematic exchange of ideas

and mutual reinforcement of fascist ideologies and contingent nationalisms.

We do not disembark at Zonderwater though, rather we follow the line of thought of those who objected and would not sign the rejection of fascism document that would allow them to work at external camps. Many of these ended up at *Koffiefontein* with the very Germans and Afrikaner nationalists who were problematic to South Africa, siding with the Allies in the war. We learn of their secret communication and fraternal sense of belonging. This signals that not all IPOWs were the same socially or politically and that some people retained their political convictions and would have stayed in the camp.

The filmmaker takes us out of the world of those who refused to recant, and a map lights up with the sites of external work camps across South Africa, a collage of sepia images shows IPOWs working as manual labourers. The camera lingers on a photograph from the time that shows a black man leading a team of horses in harness pulling a cart. In the foreground, two IPOWs are reaping grain by hand. We are about to move into the realm of labour, specifically the cheap, hard labour that provided those IPOWs who conceded, an opportunity to temporarily leave the camp. The implication for the viewer is that these histories and potential racial categorisations are entangled. Hand reaping was already on its way out in the 1940s, this is labour that exists because it can, hands are available. The camera pans across the still images, left to right; from an IPOW standing with a sheaf under one arm, pausing on the black man dwarfed by the three carthorses and unfocused in the shot, to the IPOW bent at the hip gleaning over stubble.

In the next shot we return to the train – where we are positioned as a fly-on-the-wall – overhearing the debate: how some IPOWs suffered violence for their conviction, and those who emerged from the camps if they were prepared to change allegiance did not. We are exposed to the range of what the IPOW identity could accommodate. Some ideologues, like Giachetti quoted above, never recanted: and they worry that they are erased from Italian history. Some saved themselves, the “egotists” Turilli refers to.

The documentary establishes the idea that as we head into the past on the train, as the echoes of global politics play on the soundtrack, there is no clear solidarity in the experiences of memory of the IPOWs, short of the facts of their status as prisoners. Levels of violence,

collaboration, nationalism, naturalisation, productivity and principles are established as potent themes on the journey the documentary takes us on.

The divergence in the IPOWs experience post-capitulation, and how it shaped their post-war identity are signalled as the origin for the *neri bianchi* of the title. As discussed below, this is because they enter the labour force and the labour they provide brings them into the raced labour category most often occupied by “non-whites” in South Africa. Their freedom is the freedom to work as, and alongside, black South Africans. How they comport and perceive themselves, and how they are perceived in turn by white South Africa is germane to the documentary.

Labour and Mixing

Ex-IPOW Ronnie Tiburtini says they did not know they were in a racist country yet, to “go with” a black woman was not seen as a bad thing by the IPOWs, whereas it was for the white South Africans they worked for. Tiburtini saw much of who was returned to camp for bad behaviour, as an IPOW interpreter in the offices that oversaw external employment for the prisoners. This is explained tersely, the nervous energy around the subject apparent in the close-up shot of him while talking, focused on his testimony and expressions.

Ex-IPOW Colombo, in a dramatically lit wine cellar at a table with a single glass of wine and a half-full bottle, recalls that they were given a form to sign that they were not to mix with people of colour. He also recalls that while this was talked up as a matter of importance, the reality was that the white South Africans went to bed very early, and life in the camp had its own norms. The implication was that this racial segregation was not generally adhered to out of sight of their captors.

In other parts of the documentary, black soldiers of the South African native corps, stationed as guards at Zonderwater (because they were not permitted to bear arms in the conflict) recall the lively contraband trade that developed between these two groups on the outside of South African whiteness (see *Seconda Parte: Città del Prigioniero*).

While Tiburtini speaks rapidly and quite seriously on the matter, Colombo has a twinkle in the eye. We can read at least two attitudes to

miscegenation here, ignorance of norms that seemed, then and now, unusual, and a cavalier approach to any rules.

Spetto recalls that there was some mistrust of the IPOWs, particularly by farmers of “German origins” resulting in them being worked harder than other labourers, twelve instead of eight hours, but on Sundays, they were free to go to the village to shop. He was at De Doorns in the Western Cape. When they first arrived, all the farmers considered them as yet indistinguishable from black South Africans, so they were housed behind barbed wire, but when the farmers realised they “were not cannibals”, were white and “walked on two legs” things loosened up.

The placing of up to 100,000 Italian prisoners, central to which was the perception of their place on a racist eugenic spectrum, surfaced the fault lines and indeed absurdities of the hegemony of whiteness⁷. Optically, the IPOWs presented a spectrum from dark-skinned to light and dark-eye colour to light, thus complicating the visual racing that would underpin much of how Apartheid laws were surveilled and enforced⁸.

Spetto recalls being invited into homes, sharing meals and other markers of acceptance as, if not equals, then at least not to be kept as separate as black South Africans. We encounter his own racist terms, in the tongue-in-cheek association of cannibalism and four-legged walking, with being black, but also his wry perception of the silliness of the farmers in their boundaries and prejudices.

Attention is drawn to the discussion of race in this section by the musical scoring. As Spetto begins to talk about their arrival in De Doorns and the initial racial casting, a synth chord fades in and as he says “*cannibali*” there is a keyboard chord struck, in the audio middle ground, that emphasises that word and idea. Through the rest of his story, the keyboard continues its minor key improvisation, occasionally

⁷ 100 000 is the round number often cited in relation to IPOWs in South Africa, but this reflects a total of those who passed through the administrative system. At its height, the Zonderwater Prisoner of War Camp accommodated 90 000 prisoners. Others spent much of their time in satellite camps (See Carlesso, 2009).

⁸ See Erasmus, *Race Otherwise* (2017), in which she discusses how her blackness is made visible or complicated in South Africa and elsewhere based on how people read her physical attributes, skin colour, and familial resemblances. Erasmus provides an articulation of the changing conceptions of ‘race’ within the South African context, explaining how we come to understand the long histories of its ongoing instability.

rising in volume to punctuate the narrative. This is the second instance of race and violence being given this musical underscoring in the documentary.

In a short space the documentary ensures viewers comes up against the boundaries that had usually been clearly demarcated by race. Labour and sexual encounter were culturally bounded and policed at the time. Hard, unskilled labour was for black South Africans or prisoners, sexual contact between races was a social taboo and eventually illegal. Postwar Apartheid legislated on both these matters with Bantu Education (“education for slavery”) and anti-miscegenation legislation. Here the IPOW stumbles unknowingly through both. Or was it unknowing?

Colombo ends this section saying that they (South Africans) were good people, we were more cunning though. As with the early-to-bed habits of their captors, the ex-IPOWs hint at a continuity to their habits and appetites regardless of the norms.

Simon Viera, a colonel at Zonderwater, recalls that the IPOWs were more inclined to fraternise with the farmers that employed them than the UDF guards, describing how their presence on the farms was a necessary evil to replace some of the labour lost to the war effort. However, this was not without its own complexity, because the roles they fulfilled ranged from bringing particular artisan skills to farm life or construction work, to semi- and unskilled labour, they were in the latter case filling roles that had historically been occupied by non-whites on farms.

The documentary reflects the time that it took for the humanity of the IPOWS to be proven to white South Africa, with each action weighed in the meticulous increments applied by white South Africa to the qualifying metrics of whiteness. It starts with the crude hyperbole of “cannibals” (Spetto) to the negotiation of the line crossed when “going with” a black woman (Tiburtini). In the case of the latter, the IPOWs exert some agency in adopting the position of outsmarting their captors. In doing so they are co-opted into the South African reality of concealed racial miscegenation, the discovery of which will later be investigated by the curtain-twitching Morality Police in the apartheid era, but which at this stage is a social more.

Living conditions and the racial boundary

The next scene begins with the saxophone motif. The narrator tells us that these cabins are much like those inhabited by non-white farm labourers.

Ex-IPOW Remo Barrocci gives a tour of the cramped quarters, which they called "*Villa Italia*" that he and three others occupied in the war years on a farm in the Western Cape, possibly Ceres. He speaks Italian with a thick Afrikaans accent and is dressed in the khakis particularly associated with white South African farmers. He lives integrated into the white farming community of the Western Cape at the time of filming but recalling IPOWs on the farm prompts him to consider the equation of Italians with coloured and black labourers at the time of the Italians' internment. He points out that the accommodation was cold in winter, and they had little to furnish the room with, but they did not want for anything. They were not beaten to work but could only leave the farm with written permission.

There is an analogous system that would have occurred to viewers at the time; the notorious Pass Laws that stringently controlled the movement of black South Africans and were only repealed in 1986. The Italians were not permitted to fraternise with the public under threat of imprisonment, but they could, with their boss' permission visit other IPOWs. Barrocci is emphatic that they never mixed with blacks.

"We would hang out in the cabins or steps, but never with the blacks, never, though there were lots. Because there were lots of differences between us and the blacks, many. You can say I'm bad but: today, yesterday, blacks are blacks, also us Italians. Even the women, have compassion, but no contact. Me, never [...] Also prisoners, there are good and bad, some must be punished."

The speech winds down, with Barrocci standing in the doorway of the cabins that they lived in, the viewer is given another opportunity to reflect on what is said; without commentary we are left with a return of the forlorn saxophone music. As a signifying motif this piece of music invites the viewer to take a longer perspective of this comment. The saxophone holds sustained long notes and is positioned as distant in the

musical space, creating distance and dimension for reflection. Barrocci's commentary represents one avenue of assimilation into postwar South Africa.

To position oneself as farmer, in language and dress, to set oneself apart from other labourers by voluntary racial isolation, even under very restrictive and exclusionary rules. In this way one proves belonging to whiteness ahead of naturalisation.

It is important to remember that all of this is presented from the historical moment of filmmaking, where racist attitudes could, for at least the next few years, be openly asserted. Folded into his 'race' identification were the cascading binaries that so often inform 'racing' as a conscious act (Hall, 1980): to what extent were the Italian prisoners intelligent/stupid, moral/immoral, industrious/lazy, manly/effete, trustworthy/cunning?

The process was never resolved: an informal and small-scale project of 'racing' that played out in South African media and popular imagination, it nevertheless offers insight into the processes of racial discourse within whiteness. The documentary demonstrates how IPOWs and by extension, Italian-South Africa, were not unaffected by the racial politics of the country at the time, as it shows IPOWs who became part of Italian South African communities grappling with their experience of racial marginalisation in the 1940s – firmly related to the racial politics of the time.

The framing of these two times socially and politically via the documentary offers an invaluable record of Italian white attitudes to race outside of the dominant discourses of English-speaking whiteness and Afrikaans-speaking whiteness.

The film moves from the farm context to an abandoned construction camp, that of the road project to create the original Outeniqua Pass (connecting coastal Western Cape to the Karoo hinterland). Here Egidio Bonomelli speaks of the friendship that grew between IPOW labourers and the black labourers operating the pneumatic drills. He describes both groups working for the South Africans, both far from family, and both forbidden to speak with or socialise with white South Africa.

Here, in a work camp, similarities were not mediated by rewards or punishments that went with the hierarchy on the farm. Bonomelli also questioned the difference in social norms, having grown up in Libya he

considered it strange that he should not speak with a black person, as he had always spoken with Arabs.

The testimonies in this section of the documentary show various IPOWs encountering the boundaries of South African whiteness, as they stood in the Second World War. These boundaries that would become codified post-war, already had decades and arguably centuries of established, sedimented practice in the daily lives of South Africans. Their clearest demonstration was in raced labour, where hard, physical 'unskilled' labour was performed by black men, and in the separation of races along the social spectrum ranging from separate leisure time, to racially separate sex lives. There is a generational reticence to discussing sex at all, so mention of sex in this documentary is exclusively hetero-normative.

In Barrocci's testimony there is a concomitant hardening of attitude the closer the his IPOW memory comes to the boundary: actually standing in their dwelling, that is materially the same as what a black or coloured farm worker would live in at the time of the documentary, elicits clarity from him on exactly where the boundary is, and how he policed it even when he was an IPOW.

Latin Lovers

Fraternising was one matter, but the "cardinal sin" of miscegenation was even more serious. Earlier in the episode, South African farmer Fernhout distinguishes between IPOWs on regional bases, saying that northerners did not mix but southern Italians did mix with coloured girls. Spetto and Tiburtini both speak about the seduction of farmers' wives and daughters. This is a matter that has become the core of a series of fictional romances in South African literature⁹, but here, from the mouths of the ex-IPOWs themselves, we sense the one-upmanship and machismo that stems from the Latin Lover trope that had grown up in the pre-war years¹⁰.

⁹ Van Heerden (2000), Joubert (2009, 2010, 2011) and Le Roux (2010) have all created fictionalised IPOWs in their novels that range from historical fiction in multi-generational stories in the case of Joubert and Le Roux to magical realism in Van Heerden.

¹⁰ The Latin Lover embodied in the Italian screen star, has literary and theatrical roots reaching back to Don Giovanni and Casanova (Reich 2004:27), and both of those characters are directly referred to by Tiburtini.

Tiburtini speaks sheepishly of the IPOWs “profiting” from their romantic adventures in South Africa, he gives a genteel portrait of these as the camera pans from a picture hanging on a wall, of him as a young man, to him speaking in the interview, the soundtrack is Enrico Caruso singing sweetly as Tiburtini speaks of the reputation as ‘Don Giovannis’ or ‘Casanovas’ that preceded the IPOWs arriving in a given place. Achille Armellin presents the ‘bridge of love’ in Ceres, where Italians would gather on Sundays and make music, attended by black and white people of the town, especially girls.

Both Tiburtini and Armellin speak of stumbling into a racial divide that, from the context they came from, did not exist. While labour had its clear racial boundaries that they quickly learned and accepted, on their own time, at least for these two ex-IPOWs, there was no urgency to distance themselves from the racial other when it came to romantic involvement. The complex way in which IPOWs picked their way through the cultural codes of race, adopting some and ignoring others, seems to point to a wide range of responses to the increasingly firm lines being taken by their South African captors.

Conclusion

“At first for these people we seemed like white blacks, us. It seemed that we were blacks. Because they called us ‘stupid’ and they said we didn’t know how to do anything. But because we didn’t know how to speak English or how to speak Zulu they said we didn’t have brains. But after six months, we knew a little Zulu and English. I had blacks in the camp who alone could do jobs that not even the whites knew how to do. Because they didn’t have the brain – black and white. The blacks didn’t have the brains because the whites didn’t teach them. But I taught them. But if one doesn’t teach them, they don’t learn. The blacks don’t have brains.”

Pulvirenti’s last word in the documentary is underpinned again by the mournful saxophone motif, and the visual stock image of a row of black labourers hoeing an empty field. As an end to the documentary, the return of the saxophone motif and the scene of black labour pointedly

asks the viewer to consider the IPOWs' experience of race in the light of black South Africa's ongoing experience of race. Degradation, low pay, hard labour, lack of agency, and unjust treatment briefly touched the lives of prisoners who went on to reverse all these fortunes. The reality of black South Africans in 1989 was still that of outsider.

In the last third of the film, as the experiences related become more personal and we are taken to places of significance, the race issue emerges more frequently. We can read the implied message of the film, that the regime separating races is systematic, conscious and unjust, and that when applied to 'white' people, this is obvious. Pulvirenti's words are ambiguous and shot-through with doubt about intelligence and usefulness regarding race; his own and others. We can also read in the interviews a range of approaches presented as naïve, from those who thought it laughable that Italians did not know they should not mix with other races, to those who bought in completely and took on the mantle of white supremacy, building their post-war South African life on full integration with whiteness in the racial hierarchy.

This episode of the broader documentary shows ex-IPOWs reflecting on their experience from a position as integrated Italian-South Africans. We have shown that their experience and negotiations towards that integration were a condensed version of the centuries of racial division already played out in the settled white population of South Africa. Neither English nor Afrikaans, they often failed to fit in neatly, and in some cases resisted the categorisation as part of retaining who they were before their imprisonment.

In 'Choices after Capitulation' the labels of "fascist" and "collaborator" after capitulation are complicated by how they are represented as rounded contemporary identities in the 1980s. Their complex and multi-layered reflection is groundwork for how complex race is, as it shows them as non-homogenous, all still Italians, but with diverging views and backgrounds. They are, however, represented as firmly white in the 1980s.

The section 'Labour and Mixing' demonstrated how core issues of whiteness in South Africa were tied to labour and sexual contact. These were negotiated by IPOWs in complex ways as they tried to adapt to the situation of external work camps. At once pushing boundaries to self-identify, breaking rules where they could, they were in some cases finding out where the boundary was and trying to fit in. They also

brought their own ideas about race and labour, and race and sex. These were not more or less progressive than that of white South Africa, but the burden of proof remained on the IPOWs to take up markers of whiteness.

There is an echo in the testimony of Barrocci, with the experiences noted in scholarship about Italian-American assimilation, namely that achievement of white identity is contingent on taking up the role of policing whiteness. His place in his current life, long after the war, is assured by his early self-policing as an IPOW, keeping himself separate from the black and coloured South Africans with whom he lived in such close proximity. In a remote work camp, the absurdity of these norms are exposed in another IPOWs testimony. Bonomelli's experience and background lead him to question if those sharing the margins of whiteness did not have more in common than white South Africa would have them believe. There are hints in the episode that Italian regionalism fed into this, the prejudicial view that southern Italians mixed easily across racial divides.

The "Latin Lover" is the penultimate discussion. It is emphasised by Tiburtini; his picture as a young man, with Caruso in the background, and Armellini on the 'bridge of love' in Ceres.

In the years between the end of the war and the assimilated state in which we find them, there is a reluctance to shed this romantic image in exchange for further identification with South African whiteness. Complex as it is, and with how it drew IPOWs into danger, across class and colour lines, it is retained as a source of some pride, a lightly worn machismo left over from another life.

The documentary series was taken on as a project by Steve Moni to capture testimonials from an ageing ex-IPOW community in the 1980s. It is astute in its reading of an already shifting narrative in South African politics from the dominance of a race-based nationalism to the emergence into popular consciousness of the anti-apartheid struggle with its social justice and left-leaning politics. The once confident Italian-South Africans, comfortably embedded in apartheid-era whiteness, are largely willing to reposition themselves as victims of circumstance rather than heroic fallen Italian nationals, and those who are not, are underscored with ominous soundtrack, exposed often as unreconstructed fascists and generally seem out of step with the times.

Moni politicises the position of the IPOWs concerning the ongoing struggle of black South Africa by juxtaposing their subjection and oppression in the third part “*I Neri Bianchi*” (The White Blacks). The episode *I Neri Bianchi* shows a diverse group of aging men who have polished the narrative of their time as IPOWs, even so, with every prevarication, euphemism and statement of principle, we can read the complex construction of the racialised life of twentieth-century South Africa. The crash course in whiteness in South Africa offered the ex-IPOWs interviewed a series of choices that brought them closer into or further out of the mainstream of whiteness that had held its hegemony from the end of the War until the 1980s, but was on the verge of radical change.

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MITO E STORIA IN VITTORINI E PAVESE

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Abstract

*The essay aims to investigate the chronotope of escape and the nostos of returning to the native island in the context of Elio Vittorini's literary production. The description of his Sicily, motherland with its atavistic values, immersed in a mythical and primordial atmosphere, together with the evocation of his carefree childhood, now lost and regretted in *Conversazioni in Sicilia*, rise to emblems of escape into "space" and in "time". But the poignant desire to escape from the ugliness of history, from existential anguish, away from the alienating civilization of progress and from the industrial and postmodern reality that Italy experienced after the Second World War, is also an emerging theme in *La luna e i falò* by Cesare Pavese. In both the topic also rises to a paradigm of the pain of the world, of offended humanity and of the impossible dream of resurrecting the past of a romantic-decadent civilization now in its decline.*

Keywords: Elio Vittorini – abstraction from reality – archaic Sicily – return to childhood – Cesare Pavese.

1. Vita privata e impegno militante in Vittorini: un binomio inscindibile

Figura centrale nell'ambito del Neorealismo italiano della prima metà del Novecento, Elio Vittorini (Siracusa 1908-Milano 1966) fu scrittore e saggista dal forte impegno politico ed etico, nonché instancabile organizzatore della cultura fra gli anni Trenta e Sessanta. La militanza culturale di Vittorini, finalizzata ad incidere sul reale, fu sempre improntata ad un rapporto attivo e costruttivo con le istanze del proprio tempo (Bonsaver, 2008:30-37). Per l'autore infatti la letteratura impegnata rappresenta un valore assoluto, in senso universale, "lavora principalmente per la verità" e, se necessario, deve rimettere tutto in discussione, con la sua capacità di trasformare l'uomo e la società seguendo il movimento della continua evoluzione del corso storico (Rodondi, 2008:13).

Di modeste origini, fu figlio di un ferroviere, e forse non a caso il treno e il viaggio saranno temi ricorrenti nella sua opera. Non ebbe una formazione di studi regolari: frequentò la scuola secondaria di ragioneria senza completarla. Fu sostanzialmente un autodidatta, si nutrì di letture voraci, coltivò intensi rapporti con il mondo letterario del suo tempo elaborando una propria cultura, ampia e raffinata (Crovi, 1998:32-48). Sul piano politico simpatizzò negli anni giovanili per il fascismo di sinistra nel quale ravvisava una forza energica e rivoluzionaria, alimentata dalle genuine forze popolari per abbattere il conservatorismo borghese. Nel 1926, pubblicò un articolo sulla rivista diretta da Curzio Malaparte, *La conquista dello Stato*, in cui assunse posizioni tipiche del fascismo popolare e antiborghese. In fondo, nelle radici mussoliniane c'era una matrice proletaria e l'idea che il regime avrebbe dovuto soprattutto riscattare i ceti meno abbienti. Sebbene nei fatti questa prospettiva non si realizzò perché il fascismo difese soprattutto i ceti medio-alti, in molti giovani come Vittorini, cresciuti sotto il regime, rimase la speranza del recupero delle istanze originarie del fascismo (Cogo, 2012:56-78).

Tuttavia, dopo la guerra civile in Spagna contro il franchismo (1936-1939), comprese la vera natura della dittatura fascista per cui il suo sistema ideologico entrò in crisi. Animo sempre inquieto e ribelle, dopo essere entrato in contatto con gli ambienti anarchici che si opponevano allo squadristo fascista, militò clandestinamente contro l'ideologia di Mussolini e diede ospitalità agli scrittori ebrei perseguitati (Crovi, 2006:89-96).

Lo stesso rifiuto antiborghese, il bisogno di una libertà anarchica si riscontra nel suo primo romanzo del 1933-34, *Il garofano rosso* che fu censurato, in cui un liceale adolescente cerca di realizzare la sua maturazione attraverso l'esperienza della donna e della politica. Il giovane organizza un'agitazione studentesca di carattere politico e si illude che la violenza dello squadristo fascista porterà ad un'alternativa al conformismo borghese sognando una società migliore che fosse guidata dagli operai. Nella *Prefazione* scriveva che la narrativa doveva cogliere il senso di "una realtà maggiore" in grado di riflettere una situazione universale (Lauta, 2012:18-45).

Dopo il matrimonio nel 1921 con Rosa Quasimodo, la sorella di Salvatore Quasimodo, si trasferì nella Venezia Giulia e poi a Firenze avvicinandosi alla rivista *Solaria*, con la sua esigenza di "aura poetica", di respiro culturale europeo, elegante, antitradizionalista che accusava la letteratura italiana di chiuso provincialismo. La rivista esercitò una forte suggestione sulla

narrativa degli anni Trenta e Quaranta: non solo l'eleganza formale, ma l'attenzione per lo scandaglio individuale attraverso lo strumento della prosa e l'alto profilo morale che deve assumere la letteratura (Donnarumma, 2016:161-179). Venne a contatto con gli scrittori italiani più in vista del tempo, da Carlo Emilio Gadda ad Eugenio Montale. La sua apertura alla cultura europea e americana lo portò a studiare l'inglese da autodidatta e ad interessarsi alla lettura di classici come Franz Kafka, Edgar Allan Poe, Daniel Defoe, James Joyce, Herman Melville (Leotta, 2007:78-90). Ma, come raccontò in un articolo autobiografico del 1949, *Della mia vita fino ad oggi*:

Solariano, negli ambienti letterari di allora, era parola che significava antifascista, europeista, universalista, anti-tradizionalista. (Panicali, 1994:34)

Risale al 1931 una raccolta di racconti *Piccola borghesia* apparsi su *Solaria*, dove già emerge il mito dominante dell'infanzia, come recupero di certezze perdute, di un vitalismo istintivo contrapposto alla grigia e soffocante vita borghese (Vittorini, 1991:73-75).

Trasferitosi a Milano tradusse autori della letteratura americana e anglosassone, tradizionali e contemporanei (Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, David Herbert Lawrence, William Saroyan, Erskine Caldwell etc.). Il suo stile era semplice e diretto, contribuendo alla diffusione del 'sogno' americano di un mondo nuovo, fondato sulla libertà e sull'avventura (Chirico, 2002:100-103). L'antologia *Americana* di scrittori statunitensi che curò insieme a Cesare Pavese, fu un'operazione culturale di svecchiamento, finalizzato alla ricerca di un modello di narrativa più fresca e autentica, ma fu anche un atto politico, contro l'agonizzante regime. Non a caso Vittorini subì la censura fascista per la sua sottesa adesione all'ideologia democratica. Nel 1943, quando Milano fu occupata dai tedeschi, entrò nel partito comunista e partecipò alla Resistenza. Accusato di propaganda in favore del Partito comunista clandestino, fu arrestato (Esposito, 2011: 20-23).

Dopo la guerra e la liberazione diventò un grande agitatore di cultura e incarnò la figura dell'intellettuale impegnato e poliedrico che scrive, fonda riviste, lavora nell'editoria, progetta collane, svolge intensa attività politica. Non a caso fondò il periodico *Il Politecnico* (1945-47) per una letteratura impegnata nel campo civile che non si limitasse a consolare dal dolore, ma che contribuisse, in concreto, a rimuovere le cause della sofferenza. Fu una rivista che rivendicava un progetto di distinzione, autonomia e libertà degli

intellettuali rispetto alla politica, si occupava della condizione operaia, del ruolo degli intellettuali e della letteratura (Esposito, 2011:213-217). Tuttavia Vittorini rifiutò la sudditanza della propria attività culturale a quella politica e, per tutelare la libera espressione della propria soggettività di scrittore, nel 1947 lasciò il Pci, di cui era al tempo segretario Palmiro Togliatti, estraniandosi da coloro che suonano soltanto

[...] il piffero della rivoluzione» senza agire concretamente per creare le condizioni effettive di una società rinnovata nello stesso periodo in cui il comunismo in Unione Sovietica aveva imboccato l'asprezza autoritaria della dittatura staliniana. (Iermano & Sabbatino, 2011:23-57)

Svolse anche attività di 'mecenate' della cultura dirigendo presso Einaudi la collana dei *Gettoni* nella quale tentò di

[...] veder realizzata anche in autori più giovani la propria aspirazione ad una letteratura che sia attenta ai problemi e agli aspetti più veri della realtà contemporanea, ma insieme conservi viva la tensione di una viva ricerca formale. (Catalano, 2007:40-72)

pubblicando le opere prime di nuovi talenti della letteratura italiana tra cui Beppe Fenoglio, Italo Calvino, Leonardo Sciascia. Caso clamoroso: rifiutò *Il Gattopardo* di Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, poi pubblicato con successo dalla casa editrice Feltrinelli.

Si interessò dei dibattiti culturali del suo tempo: lo strutturalismo, la Neoavanguardia, i rapporti tra letteratura, industria e tecnologia, la necessità di un rinnovamento della poetica e del linguaggio, affrontati soprattutto nella rivista tematica *Il Menabò*, fondata con Italo Calvino nel 1959 che ospitò i testi di Edoardo Sanguineti, Umberto Eco, Franco Fortini e durò dieci numeri, fino al 1967. La sua instancabile attività di operatore culturale, lo portò però a non appiattirsi sulla cifra del crudo realismo dominante, ma lo portò a tentare sempre nuovi sperimentalismi letterari (Gasparotto, 2010:12-43).

2. La ricerca delle radici in *Conversazioni in Sicilia*

Fu solo dopo la guerra civile spagnola (1936-1939) ed i suoi massacri che Vittorini, in un periodo di svolta politico-ideologica, scrisse tra il 1936 e il 1940 *Conversazioni in Sicilia*, il suo romanzo più celebre e certamente il più accurato stilisticamente, forse il punto più alto della narrativa realistico-simbolica che molti critici giudicano il capolavoro: “Uno dei più degni testi simbolici del Novecento” (Contini, 1998:234). Apparso dapprima a puntate su *Letteratura*, tra il 1938 e il 1939, fu poi pubblicato in volume da Bompiani nel 1941. Risente senz'altro della lettura degli ultimi americani e di Faulkner in particolare, il romanziere americano più legato al “mito della terra”. È proprio Faulkner infatti il romanziere tradotto negli anni seguenti, assieme al Caldwell le cui simpatie andavano nella direzione delle rivendicazioni operaie e i cui libri esaltavano la vita semplice dei poveri mezzadri nel sud degli Stati Uniti (Vittorini: 110-115).

È la storia di un viaggio di ritorno che dura tre giorni, del protagonista, l'operaio linotipista Silvestro Ferrauto, nella natia Sicilia per ritrovare la madre da cui il padre si era separato, ma soprattutto le proprie radici, alla ricerca di una felicità perduta. Nell'*incipit* del romanzo Silvestro, giovane trentenne emigrato nel milanese da adolescente, evidente *alter ego* di Vittorini, in seguito all'arrivo di una lettera del padre torna in treno nella sua terra attraversando tutta la penisola. Il protagonista denuncia la propria condizione iniziale di stasi assoluta e di rinuncia a qualsiasi speranza. È in “preda ad astratti furori”, espressione divenuta proverbiale, ad indicare il senso di rabbia inane, l'inquietudine interiore, il senso di impotenza e di inerzia rispetto ad una realtà negativa che condanna al silenzio nei confronti dell'agire storico. Il suo desiderio di cambiare la realtà del “genere umano perduto” si scontra con “la quiete nella non speranza”, frustrato dal grigio clima del declino del fascismo, dell'oppressione poliziesca, della guerra civile in Spagna, quando lo strapotere delle forze nazifasciste sembrava assoluto e gli eventi stavano inesorabilmente per precipitare, come testimoniato dai “manifesti di giornali squillanti” (Luti, 1987:45-48):

Io ero, quell'inverno, preda ad astratti furori. Non dirò quali, non di questo mi sono messo a raccontare. Ma bisogna dire ch'erano astratti, non eroici, non vivi; furori, in qualche modo, per il genere umano perduto. Da molto tempo questo, ed ero col capo chino [...]. Questo era il terribile: la quiete nella non

speranza. Credere il genere umano perduto e non aver febbre di fare qualcosa in contrario, voglia di perdersi al contrario, con lui. Ero agitato da astratti furori, non nel sangue, ed ero quieto, non avevo voglia di nulla. [...]. Ero quieto; ero come se non avessi mai avuto un giorno di vita, né mai saputo che cosa significhi esser felici... come se mai avessi avuto un'infanzia in Sicilia tra i fichidindia e lo zolfo, nelle montagne; ma mi agitavo entro di me per astrati furori, e pensavo il genere umano perduto, chinavo il capo, e pioveva, non dicevo una parola agli amici, e l'acqua mi entrava nelle scarpe. (Vittorini, 2025:7)

Il viaggio procede lungo due assi paralleli: è sì un ritorno del protagonista alle origini, nei luoghi natii, attraverso l'Italia fascista del tempo, ma si identifica anche con un processo di autoanalisi, di ricerca di verità segrete e il ricordo dell'infanzia coincide con la nostalgia di certezze perdute. Sullo sfondo campeggia il "mondo offeso", l'umanità piagata dalla guerra, dalla morte di fronte alle quali l'uomo si sente inerte ed impotente. In particolare l'immagine delle "scarpe rotte", ripresa anche da altri intellettuali dell'epoca, come Natalia Ginzburg, rappresenta per Vittorini una sorta di 'correlativo oggettivo' dello stato di assoluta indigenza, ma è anche un segno che apre alla speranza in quanto suggerisce l'idea che un giorno si sarebbe rimesso in cammino, nonostante la "pioggia" incessante. In uno dei passaggi centrali del romanzo, nel capitolo XXVII, Silvestro osserva:

Ma forse non ogni uomo è uomo; e non tutto il genere umano è genere umano. Questo è un dubbio che viene, nella pioggia, quando uno ha le scarpe rotte, acqua nelle scarpe rotte. [...]. Uno perseguita e uno è perseguitato; e genere umano non è tutto il genere umano, ma quello soltanto del perseguitato. (Vittorini, 2025:108)

Silvestro mentre ripensa alla propria infanzia, con la sua innocenza, i suoi aquiloni, simbolo di gioia e di speranza, accompagna la madre infermiera, Concezione, un nome proprio molto popolare in passato, tipicamente siciliano, nel suo giro di visite ai malati del paese per fare le iniezioni scoprendo una realtà di povertà, di sofferenza e di malattie quali la tisi, la malaria, alcuni tra i mali endemici della Sicilia del tempo che rappresentano per lo scrittore il "vero senso della morte". La madre reintroduce il figlio

all'interno dei vecchi riti della comunità, lo mette a contatto con personaggi quasi leggendari, ma gli fa conoscere nello stesso tempo le condizioni di miseria e di profondo disagio in cui vivono le popolazioni rurali del Sud (Manacorda, 1967:126-129). Le pagine dedicate da Vittorini alla madre sono tra le più intense dell'opera. La donna è descritta nel quotidiano lavoro d'infermiera, in un mondo di miseria contadina, la cui dignità tutta siciliana emerge con schiettezza poetica. La struttura testuale è costruita quasi come un *ex-voto* popolare: la donna, *mater dolorosa*, è fermata nelle stazioni dolorose in un pellegrinaggio per le case di un paese misero e assolato, immerso in un clima stregato, immobile e fuori della storia all'interno del quale si svolge quotidianamente la perenne litania di una "sacra rappresentazione del dolore". Il ritmo lento, pausato, sostiene la rivelazione delle sofferenze di un'Italia dimentica delle sue piaghe in un'epoca di imperialismi e diviene epifania della rassegnazione secolare di un popolo dove tuttavia la volontà di vivere, con dignità e coraggio, sopravvive egualmente.

Sogno e denuncia sociale pertanto si intrecciano e le 'conversazioni', a cui fa riferimento il titolo, sono i colloqui con i vari personaggi, oltre alla madre. Emblematico è il dialogo con l'arrotino Calogero, il primo degli abitanti del paese incontrati da Silvestro che prova le sue stesse sofferenze per le "offese del mondo". Ma l'arrotino, a differenza di Silvestro, non è incline alla rassegnazione, anzi è indignato per l'inerzia che lo circonda: vorrebbe agire, ma è solo, nessuno gli dà nulla di "degnò" da arrotare. Le lame, i coltelli, le spade, le forbici, i punteruoli dell'arrotino sono anch'essi allusivi, rinviano alle armi della rivolta contro l'ingiustizia e l'oppressione fascista che ottundeva ogni speranza. Significativo è anche l'incontro con Porfirio che desidera "acqua viva" per lavare le offese e dissetare il genere umano, o quelli con un sellaio, con un venditore di stoffe e soprattutto, nell'ultima parte del romanzo, il dialogo notturno, in uno stato evidentemente onirico, con il fratello morto nella guerra civile spagnola, anch'egli *exemplum* concreto di "offeso", condannato a sostenere la sua parte nella rappresentazione della storia. L'elemento simbolico, onirico, mitico, folclorico, non annulla mai il dato realistico ma si innerva in esso: si tratta ovviamente di un sogno, però con un'evidente valenza storico-politica.

In una lingua squisitamente letteraria, attraverso situazioni che assumono spesso la forma di allegorie, lo scrittore espone il suo concetto di impegno etico, di apertura ai bisogni degli altri esseri umani che esulano dalla propria cerchia privata (la famiglia, il lavoro, le aspirazioni personali) e che deve esprimersi mediante un'arte scrittoria libera che si avvalga della parola come

suo mezzo specifico di lotta ed azione. È questo il senso della sua conversazione con il misterioso Gran Lombardo, che si presenta come il re di una fiaba, “Un padrone di terre con tre belle figlie femmine”, proprietario di un cavallo “alto e fiero” che offre una via di uscita agli astratti furori che agitano Silvestro, additandogli “Altri doveri, non i soliti, altri, dei nuovi doveri più alti, verso gli uomini”.

A questo punto il viaggio catartico può dirsi concluso, Silvestro è pronto a ripartire, animato dalla coscienza di nuovi doveri e dalla volontà di compierli. Nella conclusione tutti i personaggi si riuniscono intorno al protagonista, davanti al monumento ai caduti nella piazza del paese, che annuncia il suo messaggio di sdegno contro l'umanità ferita, oppressa, perseguitata e propone “i nuovi doveri” per gli uomini. L'autore esprime in modo netto e incisivo il suo rifiuto della guerra, dei miti aggressivi, della violenza, smaschera le mitologie della patria e dell'eroismo per le quali gli umili, gli sprovveduti e gli indifesi muoiono, ma lo fa in una dimensione assoluta e universale che trascende la contingenza del momento storico. La conclusione di apertura ottimistica simboleggia pertanto il superamento dello scoraggiamento iniziale e la fede in nuovi valori in cui credere e per i quali lottare.

L'atmosfera del romanzo, scritto in prima persona, pur di impianto neorealista, risulta piuttosto arcana, simbolica e surreale. Vittorini adopera la tecnica della mitizzazione, della trasfigurazione allusiva e analogica del dato reale. Sono pagine di estrema concentrazione poetica, quasi un distillato di “lettura lirica della storia” (Manacorda, 1967:56) che sarà una costante della sua produzione.

La Sicilia descritta è arcaica, ancestrale, con i suoi profumi, l'odore dei cibi, non ancora raggiunta dalle offese del mondo: una mitica terra vergine, avvolta in una dimensione simbolica, lontana dal Verismo o dal Naturalismo zoliano con il suo intento documentario e di denuncia sociale. La Sicilia e i paesi dell'interno dell'isola assurgono a paradigmi dell'umanità offesa, emblemi del dolore del mondo, come emerge nei capitoli XXIV-XXVI del romanzo, in un momento di pausa lirico-descrittiva che succede al dramma nella narrazione:

Uscimmo e ritornammo a camminare, tra muri d'orti, verso un'altra casa del giro di mia madre, e voltammo in una strada che correva sotto alla prima, in discesa. Di faccia c'era, oltre gli spazi della valle, la montagna irsuta di neve; e da un lato erano

piccole case che, nei loro orti, sorgevano contro il cielo e la montagna lontana; dall'altro, al sole, splendente e pur spento, erano anditi di abitazioni scavate nella roccia sotto le casupole e gli orti di più sopra. Gli orti erano minuscoli; apparivano, più sopra, tra tetto e tetto, come recipienti con verdure; e per la strada c'erano capre infingarde al sole; nell'aria fredda c'era musica di zampogne con tintinnio di campane da capre. Era una piccola Sicilia ammonticchiata, di nespole e tegole e buchi nella roccia, di terra nera, di capre, con musica di zampogne che si allontanavano dietro a noi, e diventava nuvola o neve, in alto. (Vittorini, 2025:143)

La tecnica narrativa si basa sull'iterazione, l'insistita ripetitività, realizzata attraverso il rimbalzo di interrogative ed esclamative, sulle frequenti inversioni, sull'anafora delle frasi brevi, intercalate dal continuo ripetersi delle didascalie "disse", "rispose", "domandò", "continuò" etc. Questa tecnica dialogica, incalzante e marcata, influenzata dal dialogato incisivo e secco dei narratori americani, in particolare di Hemingway, conferisce all'impianto testuale un tono solenne, ieratico, rituale, oracolare, sapienziale, quasi di rivelazione di verità eterne da incidere sulle 'tavole' della memoria collettiva. Il linguaggio ermetico, allusivo e cifrato predilige la parola ricca di echi, rimandi e suggestioni ed è basato su una sintassi essenziale, musicalmente modulata da un fitto gioco di anafore insistenti (Varone, 2015:78-90).

I personaggi risultano privi di una fisionomia concreta e di spessore psicologico, sono chiamati non con il loro nome anagrafico, ma con un soprannome connotativo che ne accentua il carattere allusivo, icastico, ad esempio "coi baffi" e "senza baffi", sono cioè ridotti a personaggi "funzione" che contano non per quello che sono, ma per ciò che rappresentano, non in quanto personaggi dotati di verosimiglianza, ma in quanto portavoce dell'autore (Corti, 1974:56-58).

Il giudizio critico su *Conversazioni in Sicilia* è stato contraddittorio, distratto anche da certe dichiarazioni dello stesso Vittorini che affermò, nell'ultima pagina del romanzo, come la storia avrebbe potuto svolgersi anche in Persia o in Venezuela e quindi il legame con la Sicilia sarebbe estrinseco e non fondante. Invece alcuni elementi appaiono contraddire questa valutazione: Vittorini percorre certe zone del mito e dell'archetipo psicologico-antropologico, ma resta ancorato al tempo della storia e alla elaborazione culturale tipiche della propria terra d'origine. E se il tono

generale, che spesso indulge al simbolico, suggerisce letture metafisiche e astoriche, la dimensione mitica si stempera in considerazioni sul presente del fascismo e della miseria isolana: così “gli astratti furori” per “il genere umano perduto”, la presentazione dei due poliziotti “con baffi” e “senza baffi”, il dialogo finale immaginario col fratello morto in Spagna (si ricordi che anche Sciascia ha pagine bellissime sui ‘volontari’ siciliani durante la Guerra in Spagna) e con l’arrotino Calogero.

Coesistono dunque realismo e simbolismo. La storia si infiltra nel mito e il ritorno alla terra-madre, dopo l’abbandono del padre, episodio con cui si apre il romanzo, avviene in un contesto storico preciso, dove il dolore per l’umanità offesa e i nuovi doveri di cui parla il Gran Lombardo non sono ad esso indifferenti. Vittorini non narra solo un male universale ma, anzi, radica il percorso conoscitivo del suo personaggio nella realtà dolente della miseria contadina. Nessun bozzetto neorealista quindi, ma una simbolica “comunione col passato autentico” caratterizza questo romanzo lirico di una staticità pari al *pathos* che lo sorregge, intriso di luce e di una “bontà dolorosa” (Brigatti, 2018:67-89). Lo stile della narrazione si compiace pertanto di rapidi quadri simbolici dove l’affanno per la condizione umana s’incarna in pochi personaggi di una forza tra biblica e junghiana. Il romanzo è infatti una regressione, in senso psicoanalitico, verso un’infanzia innocente e verso un passato arcaico dove tutto parla di una virile e stoica accettazione della vita e dei suoi dolori.

3. Il tema dell’infanzia e del ritorno ne *La luna e i Falò* di Cesare Pavese

L’ambito temporale proposto da *Conversazioni in Sicilia* è l’Italia degli anni Quaranta, periodo del quale soprattutto Cesare Pavese (1908-1950) ed Elio Vittorini, furono autorevoli interpreti e testimoni. I due autori per alcuni elementi tematici possono essere accomunati dall’esperienza della Seconda Guerra mondiale. I romanzi *Conversazione in Sicilia* di Vittorini e *La luna e i Falò* di Pavese hanno in comune, quale elemento centrale, il motivo dell’infanzia, il ritorno alla terra madre e tuttavia si inseriscono in un più ampio ventaglio tematico che tocca in Vittorini le regioni del mito e della lirica, mentre in Pavese la cruda storia della miseria contadina in Piemonte, nella regione delle Langhe, e dell’emigrazione, nonché la durezza della guerra civile.

Esistono elementi di forte comunanza tra i due scrittori: in primo luogo entrambi trovano nella cultura americana e in una tradizione romanzesca interpretata come 'libera e selvaggia', il contraltare dell'autarchia mediocre e tronfia della cultura fascista, nonostante i legami del Vittorini giovane con un fascismo rivoluzionario e 'di sinistra', involontaria fucina di tanti intellettuali del Dopoguerra. Pavese, insieme ad altri, fu traduttore per l'antologia *Americana* di Vittorini, contribuendo ad elaborare il mito della letteratura e del sogno americani (Pavese, 2018:311-312). I due autori, con le loro posizioni politiche, assunsero un ruolo chiave nella vita intellettuale post-bellica: furono i più consapevoli rappresentanti del Neorealismo letterario di cui testimoniarono le ambiguità ideologiche ed i sottili legami con la grande cultura decadente che si rivela soprattutto nel rovello esistenziale che tormenta i personaggi pavesiani e nella presenza ricorrente di profondi motivi antropologici e mitici (Beccaria, 2011:61-71).

Elio Vittorini affermava che la narrativa italiana doveva diventare capace di trascendere il realismo tradizionale per attingere ad una "realtà maggiore" utilizzando un lessico che fosse realistico e simbolico al contempo, in grado di oltrepassare le barriere dello spazio e del tempo per descrivere situazioni esistenziali universali. Gli orrori dei due conflitti mondiali generarono in lui una riflessione metafisica, ampia e profonda, sul senso della sofferenza umana che lo portò alla ricerca di un luogo-spazio nel quale fosse possibile riscattare le offese incancellabili subite dall'umanità, a prescindere dal paese di appartenenza o dallo schieramento ideologico. Soltanto il ricordo e la memoria sono in grado di reduplicare la realtà attraverso il recupero del passato, trascorso in Sicilia e l'esperienza del viaggio di Silvestro nella terra natia.

Similmente in Cesare Pavese ritorna il tema del contrasto tra città e campagna, simboli del disagio esistenziale dell'uomo del Novecento, brutalmente strappato dal grembo della natura per essere risucchiato dal gorgo doloroso di una realtà artificiale e fittizia da cui desiderare di evadere diventerà quasi impossibile, se non attraverso il volo compensativo nel tempo del sogno-ricordo dell'infanzia che, non esistendo, diventa ormai irrecuperabile.

Il romanzo *La luna e i falò* (1950) fu pubblicato pochi mesi prima della tragica morte dell'autore. Narra la storia di un orfano,

soprannominato Anguilla, un “bastardo” adottato da piccolo da una famiglia povera per sfruttare altre braccia da lavoro e usufruire di un sussidio economico mensile corrisposto dall'ospedale. Anguilla, dopo avere abbandonato le Langhe ed essere emigrato negli Stati Uniti, dove ha fatto fortuna, fa ritorno, ormai quarantenne, nel paese delle Langhe in cui è cresciuto. Qui scopre che i luoghi in cui ha trascorso la sua infanzia e adolescenza non coincidono più con i suoi ricordi; il mondo contadino che ritrova gli appare cambiato, segnato dalla guerra di resistenza, dalla povertà e dal degrado. Tuttavia i luoghi della sua infanzia rappresentano per lui le uniche “radici” in cui spera di trovare accoglienza e di sottrarsi a quella solitudine e inquietudine esistenziali a cui gli anni trascorsi in America lo hanno costretto:

Un paese vuol dire non essere soli, sapere che nella gente,
nelle piante, nella terra c'è qualcosa di tuo, che anche
quando non ci sei resta ad aspettarti. (Pavese, 2014:15)

La nostalgia che lo ha spinto a tornare nelle Langhe, se da un lato risponde alla necessità di “mettere radici” dall'altro si scontra con la necessità di continuare a evadere dal mondo contadino in cui è cresciuto e di risiedere ancora da un'altra parte, in una città grande come Genova o anche più lontano, nelle terre d'oltreoceano:

Mi piace anche Genova, mi piace sapere che il mondo è
rotondo e avere un piede sulle passerelle. (15)

Anche in quest'opera, narrata in prima persona, risultano proiettati i ricordi della propria infanzia e la nostalgia per un mondo rurale incontaminato, basato sui ritmi della natura e su credenze e costumi primordiali, che si stava rapidamente spopolando per effetto dell'inurbamento. La presenza della luna accompagnava e scandiva nelle sue fasi i ritmi della vita contadina e il tempo circolare del suo calendario coincideva con l'eterno ritorno delle stagioni in cui ogni fine coincide con un nuovo inizio, come nel *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia* di Giacomo Leopardi.

Ma il ritorno stesso si rivela da ultimo deludente per il senso di estraneità sperimentato da ragazzo quando aveva capito di non essere nato in una cascina della Gaminella e di non sapere in realtà nulla sulla

sua vera famiglia. I suoi genitori adottivi nel frattempo sono morti, la cascina è abitata da gente sconosciuta, in paese nessuno lo riconosce più. Anche l'atmosfera gioiosa dei festeggiamenti di Ferragosto è cambiata nella sua percezione di uomo adulto. I falò un tempo erano i fuochi accesi dai contadini durante le feste paesane, elementi superstiti di una realtà arcaica legati ai miti della terra e ai riti di propiziazione affinché favorissero la fertilità dei campi e l'abbondanza dei raccolti. A questi falò si contrappone nel presente la perdita delle illusioni. Anguilla prende atto che la giovinezza è un'epoca che si è ormai lasciata definitivamente alle spalle. Da qui scaturisce la sua decisione di abbandonare per sempre il paese perché il mondo reale e presente non corrisponde più a quello impresso nella sua memoria.

Nuto, l'unico amico con il quale il protagonista ha mantenuto un legame affettivo si caratterizza, al contrario di Anguilla, come un personaggio statico e conchiuso sul piano psicologico. Non se n'è andato dal paese rimanendo legato al mondo contadino delle Langhe, ha deciso di rinunciare ai suoi sogni di suonatore nelle feste dei villaggi della vallata per diventare falegname, il lavoro che era già stato di suo padre, e formarsi una famiglia. Dopo anni di allegria e sregolatezza ha impresso un indirizzo ben preciso alla sua esistenza chiudendosi entro orizzonti limitati.

Il ritorno suscita nel protagonista una continua serie di ricordi che si sovrappongono disordinatamente nella sua mente. Lo sviluppo narrativo, tutt'altro che lineare, è caratterizzato da lunghe sequenze riflessive, da frequenti analepsi e, sul piano linguistico, dal continuo alternarsi tra il tempo presente e quello passato per concludersi nella percezione finale del senso di non appartenenza a nessun luogo:

Così questo paese dove non sono nato, ho creduto per molto tempo che fosse tutto il mondo. Adesso che il mondo l'ho visto e so che è fatto di tanti piccoli paesi, non se da ragazzo mi sbagliavo poi di molto. (178)

Forse fu il senso della stessa pessimistica precarietà, la crisi delle certezze, il senso di un fallimento esistenziale a spingere Pavese a cercare, attraverso il suicidio avvenuto a Torino nel 1950, il sonno della morte e dell'oblio, quale estremo ritorno al passato, alle origini di una terra *felix*, generatrice e materna, Santo Stefano Belbo dove era nato.

La prima affinità strutturale tra i due romanzi è che sono gestiti da un io narrante. La letteratura novecentesca, spesso impegnata a scavare nelle profondità della psicologia umana presenta una visione soggettiva dell'esperienza e dei sentimenti, mostra di prediligere questo statuto narrativo che pure aveva avuto un largo impiego già nel romanzo settecentesco, a partire dall'artificio del romanzo epistolare. La seconda affinità tematica è che si tratta di un ritorno o '*nostos*', anche se a proposito di Vittorini, si può parlare piuttosto di una '*nekuia*', una *descensio ad inferos*, ovvero di un viaggio nel mondo dei morti (Benedetti, 2008:120-128).

Spesso i grandi archetipi della letteratura occidentale hanno quali fondamenta i due temi dell'assedio e del ritorno già presenti nell'*Iliade* e nell'*Odissea* di Omero, ma la letteratura novecentesca ha senza dubbio privilegiato il secondo modello e i due testi ne sarebbero testimonianza. La cultura del Novecento propone spesso personaggi che vorrebbero 'ritornare' in qualche luogo accogliente ed innocente, lontano dall'angoscia esistenziale o dalle brutture della storia per cui spesso giungono al cronotopo dell'infanzia e della terra madre, come accade anche ne *L'isola di Arturo* di Elsa Morante.

I punti di vista sono però diversi: l'io di Vittorini è ancora in viaggio e il mare suscita in lui una sorta di "memoria involontaria", "mi riconobbi di nuovo ragazzo"; l'io di Pavese, invece, è già sulla piazza del paese. Ma il verbo 'conoscere' e 'riconoscere', conoscere sé ed essere riconosciuto, tesse un legame: riconoscersi ragazzo oppure non essere riconosciuto. Il mare, la natura, forse provocano un nuovo radicamento; la piazza, le persone, servono a nascondere e a non svelare.

Le differenze di stile tra i due romanzi si ravvisano nel tono più concreto in Pavese, più simbolico e lirico in Vittorini, tale da conferire ai personaggi un'aura mitica e atemporale, con un verbo fortemente espressivo a connotare la situazione "divorare il mare" da un "altipiano"; l'accumulo per asindeto "città, paesi ammucchiati ai piedi"; le risponderne sonore, l'indeterminatezza temporale. Tono più concreto assume invece la prosa di Pavese, con le sue locuzioni tipiche da linguaggio parlato, quali: "grand'e grosso", "ai miei tempi" o con le sue precise determinazioni spazio-temporali: "quest'estate" (Gigliucci, 2001:10-14).

La dimensione intenzionalmente politica è invece una chiave di lettura più immediata per *La luna e i falò* di Cesare Pavese. Il paesaggio simbolico delle Langhe, il luogo dove Anguilla cerca vanamente le sue radici, è stato violato dalla guerra e ormai “genera” solo cadaveri, non vivi. I falò gioiosi, prima della guerra, si sono tramutati nel rogo in cui viene bruciato il corpo di Santa, la figlia di un ricco possidente, “il sor Matteo”, uccisa dai partigiani.

Il viaggio di Anguilla è nello spazio delle Langhe, ma anche a ritroso nel tempo: il tempo della sua infanzia inconsapevole e a suo modo felice: non sa di essere un trovatello, non sa cosa c'è oltre le colline che delimitano il paese, e il tempo del presente, *post rem perdita*, dopo le offese della guerra e i lutti che si sono succeduti. La ricerca attraverso il mondo non l'ha soddisfatto, né Genova e il suo mare, né una California ricalcata, quasi parodisticamente, sulle pagine dei narratori americani, possono colmare il vuoto che l'uomo avverte, la mancanza di un saldo ancoraggio alla terra madre. I vocaboli chiave sono proprio inerenti il ricordo e il mutamento: il protagonista non riconosce né è riconosciuto, l'innocenza è finita nell'età della consapevolezza: non a caso l'epigrafe del romanzo è: “la maturità è tutto”.

Eppure anche l'epopea resistenziale, che avrebbe dovuto portare la giustizia sociale, non ha dato i suoi frutti e le parole di Nuto sono il contrappunto alle malinconie esistenziali di Anguilla e alla sua memoria. Così collegato al tema del ricordo e dell'infanzia vi è quello del rapporto tra adulto e ragazzo che nel romanzo si reduplica: Nuto e Anguilla nel passato, Anguilla e Cinto nel presente, un povero ragazzo sciancato che ora abita nel “casotto” della sua infanzia, vittima dai maltrattamenti del padre che, in un impeto di follia per la sua miseria, aveva dato fuoco all'abitazione.

4. Dall'attivismo letterario al silenzio narrativo

Le tematiche legate alla storia italiana nel secondo dopoguerra, il rimpianto della terra d'origine e di un'infanzia mitica, la denuncia della povertà dei ceti meno abbienti ritorna insistita, come un filo rosso conduttore unificante, anche in tutta la restante produzione in prosa del romanziere siciliano. Nel romanzo del 1936, *Erica e i suoi fratelli*, Vittorini narra la storia di una ragazza buona, intelligente e sensibile che vive in una città industriale dove la sua famiglia si era trasferita per motivi di lavoro negli anni della grande crisi

del 1929. Abbandonata dai genitori, per sopravvivere alla fame, diventa una prostituta. Ritorna ancora quel “mondo offeso” dalla povertà, dalla miseria, oltraggiato dalle ingiustizie sociali in cui la dignità umana viene calpestata. Ma Erica, come l'autore, nonostante tutto, conserverà il suo ottimismo, la fiducia, l'allegria, la vitalità, il suo senso di umanitarismo e di solidarietà ed interesse verso il prossimo (Esposito, 2011:82-84).

In *Sardegna come un'infanzia* (1936) si annida il recupero simbolico della patria perduta: una Sardegna mitica, affondata nel fascino delle lontananze con il linguaggio nuovo del simbolo (Luti, 1987:9-13).

Il successivo romanzo *Uomini e no*, pubblicato il 25 aprile del 1945, giorno della Liberazione in Italia che segnò la fine della guerra, è incentrato sul tema della Resistenza e narra la lotta di un gruppo di partigiani guidati dal loro comandante, Enne 2. Si fa più netto l'impegno ideologico e il recupero del dato storico bruciante. “Non ogni uomo è un uomo” scrive Vittorini, perché esistono persecutori e perseguitati, uomini indegni e uomini degni. La storia diventa ‘metastoria’, lotta epica ed eterna tra il bene e il male, su un piano umano universale. Si accentua il tono solenne ed oracolare, le ripetizioni ossessive, le battute di dialogo elementari, le frasi brevi e lapidarie come versetti biblici, nonché il linguaggio secco ed essenziale (Brigatti, 2016: 32-44).

Ne *Il Sempione strizza l'occhio al Fréjus* del 1947 descrive la povertà degli operai nelle periferie milanesi. Il clima è mitico, allegorico, i toni sono lirici, fantastici, simbolici e surreali, lontani dal Neorealismo e più vicini ai moduli naturalistici. Il protagonista è il nonno che in gioventù aveva lavorato al traforo, ormai ridotto all'inattività e si sofferma sull'abitudine singolare degli elefanti di morire lontano dal branco, quando si sentono ormai malati e inutili (Vittorini, 1988:67-70).

Nel successivo *Le donne di Messina* del 1949 più volte rivisto e incompiuto, si intensifica la sensazione di una storia utopica, ideale, dove vige una sorta di comunismo primitivo che si oppone al neocapitalismo tecnologico e consumistico avanzante.

Romanzo più riuscito, sulla linea di *Conversazioni in Sicilia*, è invece *La Garibaldina*, appellativo di cui si fregia una vecchia bizzarra baronessa siciliana che si vanta di avere combattuto in gioventù al fianco di Giuseppe Garibaldi.

L'ultimo romanzo, incompiuto e pubblicato postumo, *Le città del mondo* del 1967 è una sorta di apologo. Ritorna il motivo del viaggio in Sicilia, spazio mitico, atemporale, fuori dalla storia, una terra contadina e primordiale,

immersa in un clima fantastico, descritta attraverso il correre di due pastori, padre e figlio, da un'estremità all'altra della Sicilia. La civiltà contadina genuina è vista come un mondo naturale, in cui non c'è posto per il male, "dove ciascuno dev'essere come se fosse un re o un barone. Con tutti che lo chiamano Vossignoria" (Lupo, 2023:30-35), che si oppone alla civiltà del progresso, artificiale, alla realtà industriale e tecnologizzata che l'Italia stava vivendo verso la fine degli anni Sessanta, grazie al trionfo della cultura scientifica che rendeva ormai impossibile il ritorno ad una civiltà arcaica e contadina, di stampo romantico-decadente, con i suoi valori ormai al tramonto. Il regista Nelo Risi ne trasse un film nel 1975 di cui Vittorini aveva elaborato la sceneggiatura (Genovese, 1997:8-34).

Nello stesso periodo scrisse *Diario in pubblico* del 1975, una raccolta di saggi in cui riassume i materiali di carattere letterario e culturale di trent'anni di attività critica e da ultimo un'altra raccolta di saggi, *Le due tensioni*, pubblicato postumo nel 1967. L'improvviso silenzio narrativo di Vittorini si accompagnò ad un pessimismo storico progressivo che via via si accentuò per quanto egli continuasse ad amare sempre il mondo, la vita e gli uomini.

Conclusione

Il tema dell'infanzia e del *nostos*, il ritorno al luogo natale in Vittorini e Pavese ha avuto largo peso nella letteratura novecentesca, ma già nel Romanticismo l'infanzia è luogo assai indagato dalla letteratura: basti pensare alle pagine di Giacomo Leopardi sui fanciulli e, soprattutto, sulla qualità poetica della "rimembranza":

Un oggetto qualunque, per esempio un luogo, un sito, una
campagna, per bella che sia, se non desta alcuna rimembranza,
non è poetica punto vederla. (Leopardi, 2004:4426)

Certamente appare un legame tra il Decadentismo, che è fuga dalla realtà che si tramuta spesso nel ricordo e nell'infanzia, con l'elaborazione di Sigmund Freud che mise a nudo le ambiguità delle pulsioni nell'infanzia, rivelando la qualità tutt'altro che innocente di quest'età.

Non a caso il giovane, nel romanzo del primo Novecento, diviene un indiscusso protagonista: il secolo si apre con il *Tonio Kroger* di Thomas Mann e con l'infanzia rivissuta attraverso la memoria da Marcel Proust nell'opera *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Si noti, dunque, come l'adolescenza, oltre a

essere il luogo della felicità rievocata, è anche la metafora per indicare immaturità sociali o psicologiche: spesso allude infatti al rapporto tra l'artista e la società.

Ma per ritornare all'ambito italiano, l'infanzia, come emblema di un'esistenza non ancora spezzata dal male, è tema centrale nel *Fanciullino* di Giovanni Pascoli ma, anche in tempi successivi, troviamo le elaborazioni di Umberto Saba, da *Il piccolo Berto* ad Ernesto, la centralità dell'adolescenza in Alberto Moravia, ad esempio nel racconto breve *Agostino*, fino alle sottigliezze psicoanalitiche della madre-fidanzata in alcune pagine di Giorgio Caproni.

Ma sembra essere un connotato tipico della cultura siciliana impastare storia e mito per trarre una sostanza narrativa inusuale: così Giovanni Verga, lungi dall'essere un coerente "verista", innervò certe vicende di miti (si pensi al racconto *La lupa*). Corrado Alvaro in *Gente in Aspromonte*, Stefano D'Arrigo, Gesualdo Bufalino e Vincenzo Consolo continuarono questa tradizione. Ma anche la fuga e il ritorno, nella forma del viaggio secondo una dimensione tragica, che appare presente nelle corde della cultura isolana, appare tipicamente siciliano: si pensi ancora a Verga, o al contraddittorio rapporto che legò Pirandello o Sciascia alla propria terra; per finire, non si dimentichi il ritorno a casa del protagonista del film *Nuovo cinema paradiso* di Giuseppe Tornatore che, proprio al mito della Sicilia, dedicò il documentario-collage del 1988 (Malato, 2000:67-89).

Oltre la storia vi è poi la terra madre, la *magna mater*: l'uomo Vittorini non va nella sua terra a cercare la pace e l'idillio, ma a recuperare "il perduto senso eroico di sé" perché solo in questo luogo carico di simboli è possibile per Silvestro, la voce narrante, recuperare la propria identità e proclamare parole di speranza ed insieme provare la meraviglia dell'età adolescenziale nella fantastica rievocazione di ricordi, cibi e giochi, ma anche odori, sapori, colori della terra d'origine e dell'infanzia.

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ABLE (ART-BASED LANGUAGE EDUCATION): A SINGING-BASED METHOD FOR THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Sommario

Questo articolo nasce con l'intento di colmare l'attuale lacuna di ricerca sui potenziali vantaggi dell'uso sistematico della musica come strumento didattico nell'ambito dell'insegnamento delle lingue straniere. Partendo dall'idea che il piacere derivante dal canto possa fungere da catalizzatore per l'acquisizione di una lingua straniera, ABLE (Art-based Language Education) viene qui proposto quale metodo innovativo per l'insegnamento delle lingue attraverso l'educazione al canto corale. La tipica sessione didattica dell'ABLE, la rehearsal (choir rehearsal + language lesson), è descritta nelle sue quattro fasi al fine di fornire agli insegnanti di lingua un supporto dettagliato per la realizzazione pratica in classe. Con la proposta di ABLE, questo articolo mira a sensibilizzare gli insegnanti-ricercatori all'uso consapevole e sistematico del canto nella classe di lingua, offrendo elementi di ricerca per ulteriori studi sui benefici dell'educazione al canto corale nell'insegnamento delle lingue straniere.

Keywords: Foreign Language acquisition – enabling pleasure – music – singing-based teaching – ABLE (Art-based Language Education) – “rehearsal”

Introduction

As a result of globalisation, cultural and linguistic boundaries among different countries are becoming more and more blurred, while the human cultural landscape seems to be leaning towards a growingly unified and standardised cross-national model. And it is no wonder, since we all get to experience it nearly every day. English terms such as *laptop*, *Wi-Fi*, or *news* are now common nouns in a variety of non-English-speaking cultures; I first tried *naan*, the Indian bread, in

Canada; most of my Italian friends call themselves *sushi* addicts despite having never travelled to Japan, etc. In other words, multiculturalism and multilingualism permeate our every-day lives, and define them more than we are probably aware of. Yet, ironically, when it comes to language instruction, foreign languages are often portrayed as stand-alone bodies belonging to far-away worlds which are only – and partially – accessible through decontextualised textbooks via teachers' explanations. Especially when teaching wide-spread languages such as English and Spanish, it is curious how language instructors are able to close off the endless input availability around them while exclusively relying on their textbooks as the only language sources. It is almost the same as trying to explain to a child what grass is by googling it on an iPad rather than opening the house door and having them pick a blade of grass with their own hands. Surprising as it may seem, be it in public schools or in private language academies, a standardised, decontextualised and textbook driven teaching approach tends to win over a more student-tailored approach that seeks to interrelate the language classroom with students' real-world experiences and interests related to the target language.

This article explores how pleasure, and especially music-derived pleasure can potentially work as a binding factor between students' personal interests and the foreign language classroom. Eventually, ABLE (Art-based Language Education), i.e., an innovative language teaching method based on choral singing education, will be proposed as a new pedagogical framework for the Foreign Language (FL) classroom.

Filling the classroom-real life gap through *pleasure*

Filling the classroom-real life gap: this should be the very core of Foreign Language Teaching research. While in single language teaching settings, the learners' immediate linguistic need to carry out basic daily tasks using the target language can potentially work as a natural link between the language lesson and real life, finding nearly as much as a credible, consistent and motivating link in FL teaching contexts is not easy task. FL students do not need the target language to survive. They do not need it to hang out with friends or to go to the movies.

If it is not *need* that binds FL students to the language classroom, let it be *pleasure*. Arguably, mono-directional, textbook-oriented and grammar-based traditional language curricula are perceived by students as rather scarce sources of pleasure. In trying to come up with a way to make language lessons more pleasurable, one should not forget that pleasure here is not understood as mere passive amusement, but rather as an *enabling factor* capable of making students perceive the lesson contents as relevant, thus motivating them to actively engage in the learning process.

ABLE indicates pleasure as a learning catalyst, as a gateway to the contents of the language course. In other words, as a link between the language classroom and students' real-life interests. Keeping in mind this understanding of pleasure, FL teachers are, therefore, encouraged to actively integrate in the language curriculum what their students perceive as relevant and interesting, thus meaningfully 'exploiting' the deriving pleasure as enabling factor for FL acquisition.

Jones (2020:5) describes motivation as "the extent to which one intends to engage an activity". In Jones' view, therefore, motivation precedes and *enables* engagement. From this perspective, the goal of the teacher is finding pleasurable and motivating teaching strategies that allow for students' engagement. As pointed out by Jones, "through positive engagement in class over time, students are more likely to learn and perform at higher levels and to develop more productive cognition and affect related to the L2" (2).

It goes without saying that finding pleasurable and yet curriculum-relevant activities can be tricky for language teachers and there are several reasons for this.

First of all, it often seems to be common belief among language teachers that playful activities are 'not really useful'. As a consequence, the risk is that teachers propose pleasurable activities (e.g., listening to a song, watching a movie, etc.) as mere break-time entertainment in an otherwise traditionally taught lesson – or, even worse, as a filler to wait for the end-of-class bell to go. On the contrary, ABLE seeks to 'institutionalise', fully acknowledge, and systematically exploit pleasure deriving from fun as acquisition booster.

Secondly, the concept of pleasure is somehow vague and strictly related to one's previous experiences, natural inclinations and sociocultural background. And certainly, the teacher-student

generational gap does not make it easier. While a middle-aged teacher might appreciate certain authentic material, the students could possibly perceive this as outdated, boring, and distant from their daily experience. What we are looking for here is a win-win solution, a formula to create fun and pleasurable activities for all the actors within the FL classroom despite obvious generational, cultural, and social differences. However, such a formula simply does not exist.

Nevertheless, it is convenient to acknowledge that some practices are more involving than others, that certain pedagogical choices are more likely to produce more positive results in terms of learners' motivation and willingness to actively participate in the learning process. Hence, more realistically, teachers should forget about the Edenic dream of homogeneous learning communities sharing the exact same interests and learning modes. On the contrary, foreign language teachers are encouraged to acknowledge and embrace diversity within their classrooms, providing polyhedric curricula that are accessible through numerous gateways depending on students' personal interests, skillset, intelligences (cf. Gardner's MI theory, 2006) and learning modes (cf. Fleming's VARK model, 1995). In this complex mechanism, pleasure – as described above – can work as a lubricant to smoothen and empower all the single sub-mechanisms building up the foreign language classroom.

Among the numerous existing sources of pleasure, the arts – and, in particular, music – seem to have the potential to aggregate people while at the same time preserving and valuing each participant's unique expressive potential. According to Lems (2018:14), “music is universally pleasurable” and “young adults in particular listen to music almost nonstop, and their playlists form an important part of their identities”. Indeed,

[...] perhaps the greatest benefit to using songs in the classroom is that they can be fun. Pleasure for its own sake is an important part of learning a language, something which is often overlooked by teachers, and songs can add interest to the classroom routine and potentially improve student motivation. (Nadera, 2015:370)

Besides supporting students' motivation through enjoyable and playful activities, Nadera suggests that music can contribute to create a non-threatening and informal learning environment with reduced anxiety, stating that songs and

[...] in particular, choral singing can help to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere that makes the classroom a nonthreatening environment. By reducing anxiety, songs can help increase students' interest and motivate them to learn the target language. Students often think of songs as entertainment rather than study and therefore find learning English through songs fun and enjoyable. (Nadera, 2015:370)

The role of singing and choral singing in reducing classroom anxiety is confirmed by Owain Lewes. In the article describing his karaoke-based English Second Language (ESL) lessons using songs by The Beatles, Lewes reports on his field notes taken after one teaching lesson:

Because of the fun nature of the activity, my students realize that making mistakes, such as singing off key and skipping or mispronouncing a word or two, is not such a bad thing. After a few individual performances or a choral singing session involving the entire class, my students seem energised, less reserved, and more self-confident. Therefore, the simple act of singing a few songs at the beginning of my classes lowers the affective filter, thus reducing the stress of interacting in a foreign language. (Dalton & Lewes, 2015:33)

Besides its potential to lower down anxiety, song can also be a teaching tool to create informal and student-centred learning environments in that it promotes and encourages social learning through group work and shared learning experiences. Schulkin and Raglan (2014:2) argue that "music is social in nature" and that "we inherently feel the social value of reaching others in music or by moving others in song across the broad social milieu". It can be therefore hypothesised that music can be a useful tool to promote meaningful and emotionally-loaded

interconnections among pupils, thus engaging them in informal, enjoyable and community-based language learning experiences.

Pleasure as an *enabling factor* for Foreign Language acquisition

To sum up, music seems to sustain learners' motivation in that: it may meet students' needs and interests, it creates relaxed and student-centred learning environments, and it promotes social learning. These are all desirable, and yet insufficient elements to come up with the conclusion that music and songs can be pedagogically relevant tools for the foreign language classroom. As pointed out at the beginning of this article, pleasure *per se* is not necessarily an acquisition booster. It is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that pleasure acts as an *enabling factor* to allow for deep and high-quality acquisition in FL learning contexts.

In light of its intrinsic nature and structure, Tavadze *et al.* propose that pop song can be an effective pedagogical tool to enhance FL acquisition. According to the authors, songs can help by

[...] introducing the new topic, practicing grammar structures or revising tenses, teaching and mastering new vocabulary together with rhythm, stress and pronunciation practice. (Tavadze *et al.*, 2021:92).

Moreover, the use of topic-related authentic materials (and, among them, songs) can provide students with repeated exposition to semantically-related terms, thus allowing for incidental learning of new vocabulary. Thanks to rhythmic patterning and rhyme scheming, musical material can empower incidental learning and favour long-term recalling. In addition, well-selected authentic materials can support inductive learning of grammar and pronunciation.

Among its learner-friendly features, song was shown to be particularly effective in FL teaching because of its potential to provide meaningful repetition. As emphasised by advocates of the pattern drilling methods, good levels of language acquisition often come with great amount of repetition.

According to Kelly (2000:16), "one of the primary manners by which pronunciation is practiced in the classroom is through drilling".

Basuki (2018:45) states that “teaching [...] pronunciation is simple [...] in that such teaching involves merely the drilling of students on the various sounds”.

While good arguments can be found to support the hypothesis that pronunciation is acquired through repetition, it should also be considered that drilling methods normally presented by teachers or in textbooks tend to be fairly monotonous and potentially boring. Calling upon Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), it should be taken into consideration that boredom inhibits acquisition by activating the affective filter, and should, therefore, be avoided in teaching settings.

Tavadze *et al.* propose song as a pedagogical tool that provides repetition of language structures while sustaining learners' interest and motivation. They observe that “songs can be interesting and enjoyable at the same time” and that, by learning through song, “students will find themselves full of stamina, less worried and [more] involved in the learning process” (2021:92). In line with this view, Kumar *et al.* (2022:2) assert that “songs do not only offer language practice opportunities through repetition”, but they also provide a pleasurable and “easy-going learning atmosphere”.

Music as *enabling pleasure*: the song-language link

As indicated above, Lems (2018:14) defines music as “universally pleasurable”, also arguing that it is “part of our lives in ways both big and small.” Similarly, Gray (2001:53) states that “there is a deep human need to create, perform, and listen to music”. However, taking into consideration the literature previously mentioned, it seems that songs' beneficial effects go far beyond their entertaining potential. Indeed, it has been proposed that songs can work as effective tools to pleasurably learn grammar, new vocabulary, and pronunciation. In this sense, it seems that, if strategically exploited, music-derived pleasure can work as an enabling factor for foreign language acquisition.

This hypothesis gains relevance if analysed in light of the fact that learning a song “is analogous in many ways to learning a language” (Lems, 2018:15). As he observes

we are required to produce and employ a repertoire of specific sounds, learn new patterns and rules, and master

the 'syntax' of songs and compositions. As musicians become more proficient, they — like language learners — make ever-closer approximations of the target sounds until they reach a level of ease and enjoyment, or 'fluency'.

This song-language parallel is in line with Jolly (1975:11), who states that

[...] the close relationship between language and music is an easily recognizable one. Both entities have significant common elements and similarities. Songs might be looked upon as occupying the middle ground between the disciplines of linguistics and musicology, possessing both the communicative aspect of language and the entertainment aspect of music.

Jolly further supports the existence of a closely knit speech-song bond by proposing that songs can be considered as “‘distortions’ of the normal speech patterns of a language” (11), concluding that they can represent “valid material for study within the broad framework of language learning” (11-12).

Referring specifically to ESL teaching, Dalton and Lewes (2015:32) seem to confirm Jolly's view 40 years later by stating that “reading and singing song lyrics utilising karaoke-style performances provides ESL teachers with an effective English language acquisition teaching tool”. They add that

[...] singing the lyrics of popular songs provides ESL students with multiple exposures to essential foundational oral and written English vocabulary and grammatical structures. This practice develops students' familiarity with the pronunciation and spelling of high frequency sight words, thereby developing reading skills and oral language proficiency. (32)

Moreover, as indicated by Dalton and Lewis, singing English song lyrics provides students with “a new genre of English language material for lifelong learning and enjoyment” (32).

Crucially, neurological studies have shown that ‘music syntax’ is processed in the same area involved in language syntax processing. According to Maess *et al.* (2001:540), “it seems plausible that music, like language, has a syntax: both have a structure based on complex rules”. In their study, Maess *et al.* aimed to “localize the neural substrates that process music syntactic incongruities” (540). They found that music incongruities processing occurs in Broca’s area, which is noteworthy considering that “Broca’s area and its right homologue [...] are involved in the processing of syntactic aspects during language comprehension” (543). In other words, Maess *et al.* found that music processing activates the same neural networks involved in language syntax processing. Such results might have significant consequences in the FL classroom. Taking advantage of the strong music-language relationship at the neural level, teachers could design music-based activities to enhance foreign language acquisition.

The melody-prosody relation and the benefits of music on Foreign Language oral production

While a lot of attention is paid by foreign language teachers to grammar accuracy, coherence, and cohesiveness, pronunciation instruction tends to play a marginal role in FL curricula. Contextually to the rise of the communicative method, while written correctness has kept a central role in FL teaching, communicative effectiveness and overall ‘understandability’ has been emphasised at the expense of pronunciation and prosodic accuracy in oral production. In particular, the linguistic dimension of prosody is barely represented and the many FL students wanting to improve their prosodic skills are ultimately left to self-directed learning.

Interestingly, several studies have revealed a strong melody-prosody relationship, suggesting that including music in FL instruction might raise awareness on and favour the learning of prosodic features such as pitch and intonation in spoken language. That many FL curricula based on the communicative approach do not provide sufficient prosody instruction seems to be contradictory, especially when considering that “pitch contour of [a] word can change the meaning of [that] word – not only the nuance, but also the core meaning” (Yip, 2002:1).

The relevance of pitch variations in effective communication is also emphasised by Mang (2001:5), who notes that

[...] speakers of non-tonal languages use 'variations in the shape of the pitch contour over a sentence to convey intentions and expressions'.

Put simply, in order to get full understanding of one's communicative intention, literal comprehension has to happen along with accurate prosodic interpretation.

McCormack and Kloppe (2016:420) explain that

[...] through the examination of pitch contours within [...] non-tonal languages, it is evident that contours within both music and speech are more interconnected than one assumes.

Consistently, Stevens *et al.* (2013:59) assert that "music and speech are auditory forms of communication that draw on common process[es]", explaining that "the shape of the melodic line or pattern in the rise and fall of pitch" are "aspects of speech that are analogous to melodic contour in music".

It is proposed that, provided "music and oral language unmistakably converge" (McCormack & Kloppe, 2016:419), including music training in FL curricula could be a way to refine students' skills to perceive and effectively reproduce rhythmic, tonal and melodic elements characterising native speakers' oral productions, so as to achieve oral fluency in the target language.

Another reason to promote the use of music in FL teaching may be found in the fact that the tonal characteristics within a culture's music are "related to the prosodic characteristics of its speech" (Han *et al.*, 2011:1). Thus, studying the melodic patterns of a song in the target language could be a way to study its prosodic functioning.

From this perspective, it can be concluded that extensive music training programs (e.g., language-oriented choral singing) should be integrated in FL curricula to support students' discovery, analysis and conscious reproduction of the prosodic features of the oral language.

Through singing, it is possible to engage students in enjoyable activities that allow for an in-depth analysis of language sounds, thus improving students' receptive and productive phonetic skills. Indeed, Leith (1979:540) posits that "there probably isn't a better or quicker way to teach phonetics than through songs".

In light of what has been discussed so far, it can be concluded that using music in FL learning settings can be an effective tool to enhance foreign language learners' prosodic and pronunciation skills.

ABLE (Art-based Language Education): A singing-based teaching paradigm for Foreign Language teachers

A school without a choir is like a body without a soul.
(John Rutter, *The Importance of Choir*, 2018)

Songs not only represent material for study, but represent a 'method' of language study within themselves. (Jolly, 1975:11-12)

Despite the revealing findings briefly presented in the sections above, a consistent body of literature aimed to design a music pedagogy for the FL classroom seems to be missing. As a consequence, this article can be seen as a practical attempt to fill this research gap by providing teacher-researchers with a music-based method, i.e., the ABLE method, for FL classroom practice. Here below, I propose a detailed description of ABLE by briefly reviewing each of the terms building up the acronym.

Art-based

Although this article focuses on singing training, a broader term – i.e., 'art' – has been chosen since more performing arts can be used at the same time as meaningful sources of *enabling pleasure* to enhance FL acquisition. For example, a consistent body of literature suggests that drama pedagogy can produce excellent results in terms of foreign language acquisition (cf. O'Neill, 1995; Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Winston, 2012; Baldwin & Galazka, 2022).

Regardless of the performing art(s) selected, what should be noted here is that the proposed pedagogical method is understood to be *systematically based* on art training. This is a disclaimer to clarify that infrequent use of songs and isolated role-play activities as usually occurs in traditional FL teaching settings is profoundly different to the systematic art-based language teaching method proposed in the present article. Borrowing Jolly's words, ABLE is based on the concept that songs "represent a 'method' of language study within themselves" (Jolly, 1975:11-12).

The idea is that students receive semi-professional choral singing training in laboratorial activities within which singing coaches and FL teachers proactively cooperate in designing language curricula aimed at achieving artistic excellence *through* foreign language mastery.

When considering the improvement of students' speaking skills, for example, specific training techniques used by professional singers to achieve impeccable diction will be systematically implemented in the FL classroom to enhance students' pronunciation. Similarly, specific score-reading techniques and melody and rhythm patterning strategies will be 'borrowed' from the world of music performance to analyse prosodic and rhythmic features of spoken language. In other words, thanks to ABLE, student-performers can become familiar with their vocal instrument and learn how to regulate it and adjust it accordingly to their communicative needs and intentions when it comes to real-life conversations.

Language

Of course, ABLE's ultimate goal is language acquisition. Nevertheless, this method is centred around the idea that language should be perceived by learners as a means to, rather than the only goal of, the learning process. According to Krashen's *forgetting principle* (Krashen, 1982:168) language learners better acquire a language when they 'forget' they are studying it.

Thus, ABLE's laboratorial choir lessons are meant to focus students' attention on their singing rather than on their language performance while actually being exposed to a highly stimulating activity in terms of linguistic input. In more practical terms, students will put great effort in pronouncing the sung words correctly not because they perceive it as

the explicit learning goal for the class, but mainly because they want their singing to 'sound nice' compared to the rest of the choir. In this way, language accuracy will be perceived and acknowledged by students as a meaningful goal because it is directly functional for the success of an activity which they perceive as fun, relevant, and socially rewarding.

Moreover, choir rehearsal – and those who sang in a choir will remember this well – is built mainly upon repetition. The score is broken into sections and the song is studied measure by measure, repeating in particular the sections that present any kind of criticalities in melody or pronunciation.

This is the perfect example of meaningful drilling: the passage is not repeated over and over 'just' to learn the language. The choir master insists on those measures because the choir must sound as one voice, because the singers must respect the dynamic indications, because the students must place word-final consonants at the exact same *tempo*, etc.

During such drilling, relevant acquisition processes are being activated at a more subconscious level due to meaningful repetition of specific sounds, vocabulary, and/or grammar structures.

The choir singers' 'waking nightmare' seems to prove the effectiveness of this learning method: after rehearsal, the lyrics of the song they have been working on for hours will 'haunt' them and they will sing it over and over on the subway, in the shower, while trying to study, until the next rehearsal.

This suggests that, if wisely selected and meaningfully exploited (cf. the definitions of *utility* and *usability* in Santipolo's BLT theory, 2017), songs can be viewed as valid work material for the FL classroom.

Education

This term has been selected as a reminder that FL learning is an extremely multi-layered and complex process which should never be 'banalised'. Regardless of the teaching style(s) adopted, FL teaching remains a discipline and, as such, it requires academic rigor and pedagogical awareness on behalf of the teacher.

Hence, while ABLE brings forward a prominently laboratorial approach, it also encourages holistic education which encompasses a variety of teaching methods, including the more traditional ones. As a

direct result, ABLE's typical lesson is a blend of a *choir rehearsal* and a *language lesson*, which can be referred to as *language rehearson*. Each *rehearson* typically articulates in four phases.

Phase 1

Taking inductive learning as an overall framework, Phase 1 starts with first-hand practical experience, i.e., with vocal warm-up (diaphragmatic breathing exercises, humming, vocal scales with vowel sounds, musical exercises on consonant sounds to improve articulation, etc.), score analysis (analysing the song's overall structures and phrases), and singing.

While studying the song from a more musical perspective, students have the chance to 'discover' at intuitive level the authentic language in the lyrics via the mechanisms described in the previous section. At this stage, the song is broken down into sections which should be studied separately focusing on specific passages and details as indicated by the teacher-conductor.

During song analysis, the choir can also be divided by parts (sopranos, altos, tenors, basses) so that each group of students can learn their melodic lines. In this phase, it is the teaching staff's responsibility to effectively balance artistic directions and musical training with some degree of language instruction, making sure learners are given numerous chances to observe the target language set for that specific session (e.g., a grammar topic such as the structure and use of present perfect).

Nevertheless, since the primary goal of Phase 1 is learning the song to be later performed, students should be let free to experiment with the target language without worrying too much about linguistic mistakes.

Phase 2

This phase is more similar to a traditional language lesson, in that students are invited to carry out some language activities on the target structures. For example, the teacher could integrate the song lyrics with other types of authentic materials (a relevant literary text, a topic-related article, a movie clip, another song, etc.) and ask the students to work in groups and to recognise language patterns with the outcome of

identifying a grammar or phonological rule that explains the observed examples.

Phase 2 could conclude with a wrap-up activity in which the teachers gather their students' hypotheses, correct and integrate them to eventually present the theory in the 'talk-and-chalk' style.

Phase 3

Here the class reunites as a choir, and the song is performed again, but this time with an enhanced linguistic and musical awareness. Phase 3 is the refinement phase, during which students apply the rules they have intuitively discovered, inductively analysed, and systematised during phases 1 and 2.

The goals for this phase are both musical and language accuracy. Hence, the teaching staff can intervene to refine learners-singers' performance, insisting on more critical passages to make sure everyone is on the same page. It goes without saying that, whenever needed, teachers can intervene in Phase 3 with additional pills of explicit language or music instruction, so as to improve learners' singing and overall performance.

Phase 4

This is typically an individual take-home assignment and can be defined as the productive phase. At this stage, the student is asked to produce original content basing on the knowledge acquired during phases 1-3.

As observed by Gardner (2006:255), an education that does not reflect natural diversity among members of the target group "is actually the most unfair education". Novello (2022:vii) argues that "talking of inclusion is talking of respect. Each member of the class group has the right to see their characteristics accepted and supported".

In line with this view, homework assignments in Phase 4 should be assigned as open tasks, or teachers should at least provide a meaningful list of different tasks students can choose from, making sure all intelligences and learning modes are represented. For example, while logical-mathematical students might want to reinforce the just-learnt rule through mnemonical book-based exercises, more creative students with predominant linguistic intelligence might prefer to write poems or

prose texts basing on the language and literary-cultural themes covered during the *rehearson*. Similarly, musical students may decide to write and record a new song as a way to creatively expand on the musical, linguistic, and cultural or literary elements contained in the song performed in class. It goes without saying that such original productions could represent valid material for future lessons.

Considering the collective nature of ABLE's *rehearson*, Phase 4 consists mainly of individual work, that also acknowledges intrapersonal students who enjoy working in their own company.

Nevertheless, the teacher can decide to include group-work open tasks among the options to give interpersonal students the chance to share their talents and realise more complex content which requires teamwork (editing a video, putting up a small show, recording a song, etc.).

Figure 1 (below) graphically represents the dual nature of the *rehearson*, showing elements from both the choir rehearsal and the language lesson. Based on this general framework, Figure 2 (next pages) summarises the 4 phases of a *rehearson*, indicating that Phases 1 and 3 mostly include activities typically found in a choir rehearsal, whereas Phases 2 and 4 lean towards a more traditional language lesson.

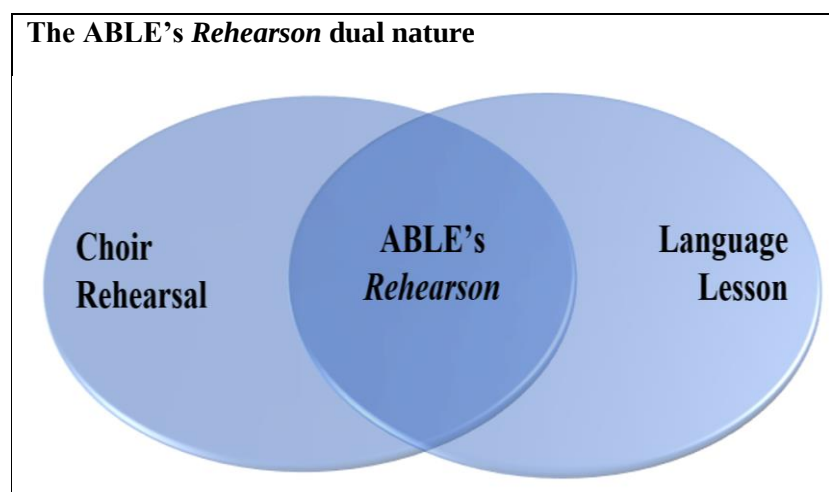


Figure 1. The ABLE's *Rehearson* Dual Nature: A visual representation of the *rehearson* as a unified approach that blends musical and linguistic learning.

The Rehearson’s 4 Phases

Choir rehearsal	Phase 1: Studying the song Vocal Warm-up: breathing, humming, vocal scales, musical exercise on consonant sounds articulation, etc. Introduction to the song: author, context, meaning, overall musical structure, etc. Detailed song study: the song is sung and thoroughly studied in all its sections, with a focus on particularly challenging and/or relevant passages. Musical instruction: the focus in this phase is mainly musical accuracy. The choir might break out into vocal sections (sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses) to study the melodic lines separately. Introduction to the language topic: at this stage, students are only introduced the session’s language topic at an intuitive level. They observe and use the language in the lyrics without necessarily analysing or fully understanding it.
Language lesson	Phase 2: Studying the language Inductive analysis of the language topic: students work in group to reflect upon the target language contained in the song lyrics (e.g., use and structure of the present perfect). Critical linguistic comparison: students compare the target language in the song with different related authentic materials to find patterns. Linguistic Hypothesis: eventually, each group comes up with a tentative hypothesis on the functioning of the language target observed so far (e.g., the students hypothesise how the present perfect is used and formed). Teacher’s wrap-up activity: the teacher discusses, integrates, and corrects the group hypotheses and provides explicit and contextualized language instruction (e.g., they explain how the present perfect is used and formed drawing on the texts previously analysed by the students).

Choir rehearsal	Phase 3: Performing the song Linguistically and musically aware choral performance: while singing, the students put in practice what they acquired in Phases 1 and 2. Musical and linguistic refinement: the song is performed several times while the teacher-conductor refines musical and linguistic content. (e.g. focusing on accurate pronunciation of past participle endings in the present perfect occurrences). Performative language reinforcement: singing the lyrics over and over, the students repeat and ‘interiorise’ the target language just acquired.
Language lesson	Phase 4: Producing with the language Take-home assignment: students are asked to produce original material (a poem, a video, an essay, etc.) based on the acquired knowledge and according to their tastes, interests and needs. This can be an individual or a group task depending on the specific context and on the student’s prevailing learning mode(s).

Figure 2. A concise summary of the four phases of the ABLÉ’s *Rehearsal*, which integrates choral rehearsal techniques and more traditional language teaching strategies.

Obviously, this example is not the only possible way to plan a *rehearsal* within the ABLÉ framework. Each learning context is characterised by unique features and participants are faced with specific context-related challenges. Therefore, to apply a standardised teaching paradigm indistinctively in any or all learning environments is not only unthinkable and impractical, but also inconvenient in terms of providing high-quality and acquisition-bound education.

On the contrary, teachers are encouraged to tailor the *rehearsal* structure to the specific learning contexts considering in particular three elements which mutually affect each other, as graphically represented here in Figure 3:

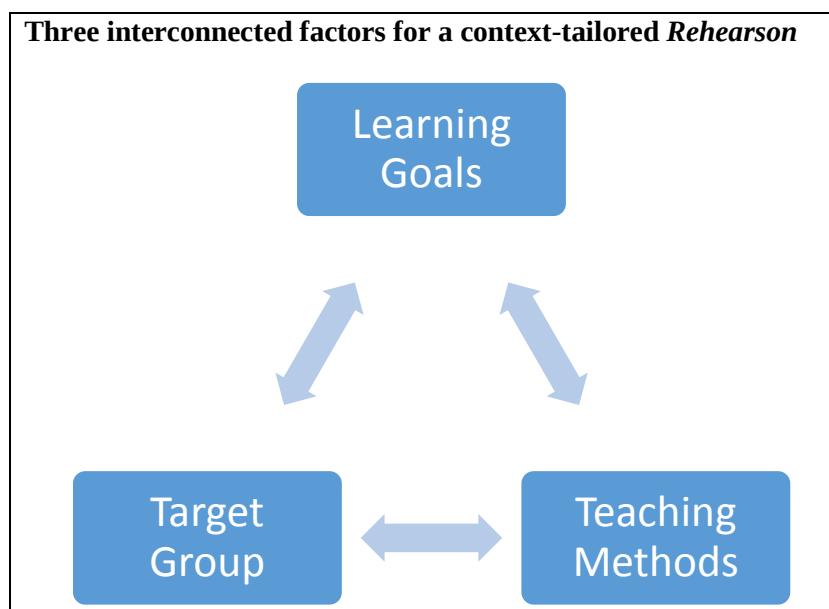


Figure 3. The three interconnected factors of a context-tailored rehearson: Learning Goals, Target Group, and Teaching Methods mutually influence each other to shape an effective and adaptive learning process.

As showed in the diagram above, although the learning goals might be set by the teacher(s), they should at the same time be selected considering the target group's features (e.g. language proficiency level, students' interests, students' needs, sociocultural background, etc.). Likewise, the teaching methods should be chosen based on the learning goals, but also considering the target students' predominant intelligences and learning modes, so as to make sure the ways the content is taught is cognitively consistent with the way those specific students receive and process new linguistic input. By consciously combining these three elements, foreign language teachers should be able to adjust the *rehearson* to their and their students' needs. Guided by the same principles of flexibility and feasibility, teachers can refer to the following info chart as an overall framework for the practical realisation of a *rehearson*:

The Language *Rehearsal*: a practical framework

Teaching staff	A foreign language teacher and a choir conductor/vocal coach (or a foreign language teacher with musical and singing competences and/or conducting experience); An accompanying pianist is strongly recommended, although not strictly needed (instrumentals can be used instead; <i>a cappella</i> singing is also an option).
Students	Any age is fine. Just note that working with adult singers and white voices at the same time can be technically challenging and sometimes inhibiting. Moreover, interests and needs of foreign language students belonging to different generations may significantly vary. Number of students: 12-25. Ideally, the target group consists of at least three basses, three tenors, three altos, and three sopranos. At the same time, involving more than 25 students may decrease each student's talk-time and may make teamwork in Phase 2 more difficult to manage and potentially less effective. Teachers might want to opt for 1-, 2-, and/or 4-voice songs depending on students' vocal features, male-female ratio and overall student number.
Timing	Each <i>rehearsal</i> should last at least three hours with a 15-minute break in between. Depending on the specific lesson's goals, the teaching staff can decide to include Phase 4 within the three hours rather than assigning it as homework.

	If needed, the teaching staff can consciously choose to skip some of the phases and dedicate more time to some specific activity (e.g., score analysis or language-related analytical and/or productive activities).
Classroom type	A clean, tidied and welcoming room with good acoustics (a gym with high ceilings is very bad, a regular classroom works well, a carpet-floored room with wooden ceiling is ideal); To easily and quickly shift from phase to phase (e.g., from choir position to a group-work setting) students should sit on mobile desk chairs for both left-handed and right-handed students. Heavy desks or any kind of physical barrier inhibiting easy movement should be avoided.
Specific equipment	A whiteboard; A digital board with Internet connection; A stereo system with good-quality loudspeakers; At least 4-5 fully functioning laptops for group activities; A wheeled piano or keyboard (or more instruments depending on the context); Music score stands for both students and the conductor.

Figure 4. Table summarising the key practical components of the language *rehearsal*, including teaching staff roles, student considerations, timing, classroom setup, and required equipment for an effective and easily adaptable learning experience.

Conclusion

The present article has proposed ABLE as an innovative method to teach foreign languages through choral singing education. Drawing on the idea that pleasure can work as an enabling factor for foreign language acquisition, different works from the existing literature have been critically interrelated to show how music-derived pleasure can

enable and enhance FL acquisition processes. As a result, music has been showed to support active engagement and students' motivation throughout the learning process. Moreover, songs have been proposed as valid work material to teach and learn FL pronunciation and prosody, but also grammar, vocabulary and song-related cultural or literary topics.

In light of these promising results, this article has proposed ABLE as a practical tool for teacher-researchers who are willing to design their FL curricula within the broader framework of music pedagogy. At practical level, ABLE's typical teaching session, i.e. the *rehearsal* (choir rehearsal + language lesson) has been thoroughly described in its four phases to provide teacher-researchers with step-by-step support for practical realisation.

In this article, ABLE is not conceived as the ultimate version of a new teaching method, but rather as a practical attempt to fill the research gap on systematic music pedagogy for the foreign language classroom. Hence, it will be my pleasure to further elaborate on ABLE through insightful collaboration with foreign language teachers and researchers so as to refine, integrate, and improve the proposed art-based language teaching method based on further research findings and practice-based teaching experience.

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EXPLORING VERBAL GIFTEDNESS: LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE OF THE GIFTED ADOLESCENT STUDENT

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Sommario

Quando il talento si intreccia con il fenomeno evolutivo dell'adolescenza, gli insegnanti si trovano ad affrontare sfide molto complesse. Questo articolo esplora le peculiarità degli adolescenti gifted, sottolineando, in particolare, la loro spiccata sensibilità unita ad avanzate capacità verbali. Analizza anche il ruolo dello sviluppo linguistico come tratto chiave di emersione del talento, evidenziando come strategie di insegnamento inclusive, applicate all'inglese come lingua straniera (come la Tassonomia di Bloom, il Circolo Socratico e il Problem Solving creativo), possano promuovere il talento verbale. Attraverso la sperimentazione pratica in classe, lo studio dimostra che alcune metodologie complesse non solo supportano gli studenti plusdotati, ma possono anche migliorare le prestazioni dell'intera classe.

Keywords: verbal giftedness, inclusive teaching methodologies, complex learning.

1. Introduction: The Gifted Adolescent

Giftedness is a complex and manifold construct; starting from the assumption that *to be gifted* is culturally specific (Tannenbaum, 2000; Baldwin, 2005; Leavitt, 2017) and *reflects the value of society* (Sternberg & Davidson, 1985; Subotnik *et al.*, 2011), Western scientists agree that the term *gifted* is perhaps the most used to define people with special attitudes towards an area or more specific areas:

For over a hundred years in Western cultures, gifted children have been given labels that connote 'having great natural ability'. (Leavitt 2017:8)

Overall, the definition of giftedness (and High Ability or High Potential as the most widespread terms to define people with above-average abilities) is still quite limited and leads to a sort of paradox: indeed, as Subotnik *et al.* (2011) point out: "It is ironic that one of the most vexing questions in the field of gifted and talented education is how to define giftedness".

Albeit far from being a complete formulation, in my PhD thesis I defined giftedness as: "Over-sensibility applied to a potentially high cognition. It's the over-sensibility to move logic, to create complexity, to strengthen motivation and not vice-versa" (Azzalini, 2023), where all the cognitive and emotive traits meant to intertwine to form a beautiful web of complexity.

As far as gifted teenagers are concerned, Richard Cash claimed that:

Adolescent gifted learners are some of the most complex students a teacher will encounter in his or her career. Not only they are experiencing adolescent development, which has its own issues, but they are gifted on top of it. (Cash, 2018:337, cited in Danielian *et al.*)

This quotation has two elements which are worthy of being considered: on the one hand adolescence, one of the most complex transitional stages in a person's life; on the other hand, giftedness, a longstanding condition, often overlooked by adults (parents, teachers and educators), that is reaching its peak in this developmental phase characterised by a high neurological plasticity.

Zanetti underlines the essential need for teenagers to give sense and meaning to their lives, explaining that:

This phase/condition assumes even more significance in case of a high potential teen who is, in general, more easily influenced and more sensitive than her/his peers, and so she/he questions her/his status in life more intensively. Furthermore, expectations and pressures from the outer

world – parents, school, friends – expose her/him much more to the risk of having to discover quickly ‘who I am and who I want to become’. (Zanetti 2019:11)¹

At this point of their life, teenagers can be either aware of their giftedness, encountering many difficulties to deal with it, or still being totally unaware of their neurodiversity, encountering even more difficulties as they feel strange and different to the rest of the world.

Before explaining their traits related to language learning and in order to fully understand their peculiarities, it is important to focus on the concept of *over-excitabilities*. Dąbrowski, in his *Theory of Positive Disintegration* (TPD), argued that gifted people are often associated with extraordinary excitement, and defined over-excitabilities as

[...] higher than average responsiveness to stimuli, manifested by either psychomotor, sensual, emotional, imaginational, or intellectual excitability. (Dąbrowski, 1972:303).

Each over-excitability can be related to adolescence and read in light of the following features (retrieved and adapted from Bailey, 2010:5-6):

1. *Psychomotor*: surplus physical energy but also rapid speech and/or compulsive talking.
2. *Sensual*: heightened ability to experience sensory or aesthetic pleasure.
3. *Imaginational*: capacity to visualize events very well.
4. *Intellectual*: intensified activity of the mind.
5. *Emotional*: the way of experiencing emotional relationships.

Each excitability can have positive or negative implications for a gifted teenager, as explained in the table below²:

¹ Questa fase/condizione assume ancora più valenza nel caso del ragazzo ad alto potenziale che, in generale, è più influenzabile e sensibile rispetto agli altri adolescenti, e perciò mette in discussione il suo status nella vita in modo più intenso. Inoltre, aspettative e pressioni dal mondo esterno – genitori, scuola, amici – finiscono per esporlo maggiormente al rischio di dover più in fretta scoprire ‘chi sono e chi voglio diventare’. (Zanetti, 2019:11)

² The table is retrieved from Azzalini, 2024:66-67.

EXCITABILITY	POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE IMPLICATIONS IN ADOLESCENCE
1. <i>Psychomotor</i>	The excess of physical energy can be transformed into positive mental energy through concentration and the acquired ability to focus on intellectual rather than physical issues. Impulsiveness and difficulty in time management requires tasks subdivision from the most to the least demanding activity. Rapid and compulsive talking allows to the possibility of taking pauses reflecting on what is necessary to say and what can be omitted.
2. <i>Sensual</i>	The high sensitivity to textures, lights and smells sometimes requires an adaptation of the environment surrounding a gifted person. On the other hand, high sensory stimuli can lead to a different, deep perception of the Nature, the Arts, of what is beautiful and aesthetically pleasant. In this way, sensitivity can become productive and not limiting.
3. <i>Imaginational</i>	Vivid visualisation of events can lead to creativity and intuitiveness. Gifted teens with imagination over-excitability can use figurative language, create worlds of fantasy and associate events, things, people, objects or procedures to precise images they create in their minds.
4. <i>Intellectual</i>	A gifted mind works relentlessly during the day and, very often, also at night. The avid need of knowledge, of understanding theoretical and complex thinking, the need to be answered to probing questions make a gifted teenager a challenge for many parents

	and teachers. But their positive attitude towards knowledge can be an example to follow for their peers.
5. <i>Emotional</i>	Emotional relationships in adolescence can follow two opposite paths. On the one hand the path of introversion, inhibition, and fear; on the other hand, the path of enthusiasm, concern for others and empathy. For a gifted teen it is important to share her/his emotions and to transform their deep and positive sense of justice into something that can become a real contribution for the whole community.

The table above is just a summary of the complexity in dealing with gifted teenagers and their personality being defined. As Siaud-Facchin (2019:99) asserts: “The gifted adolescent isn’t meant to be taken by the hand, he must be carried along with you”.³

In the second paragraph, the focus on verbal ability is explored, with the objective of reinforcing the knowledge of this peculiar category of learners and to potentiate their school performance.

2. Exploring verbal ability: language performance of a gifted learner

Many gifted children start to speak very early and in a very complex way: “Language precocity is of particular note” (Vaivre-Douret, 2011:5). Indeed, for many authors, language complexity and expertise are some of the first signs through which a parent can recognise a potentially gifted child:

Parents can accurately identify children with precocious language when they are 18-24 months old, because their early language skills are so strikingly ahead of other

³ “L’adolescente plusdotato non si prende per mano: lo si porta con sé”, Siaud-Facchin, 2019:99.

children of that age (Robinson, Dale & Landesman, 1990; Robinson & Robinson, 1992; cited in Robinson, 1993:5).

Together with language precocity, in gifted children and adolescents, other language traits are peculiar (here summarised):

- Use of extensive and accurate vocabulary (Clearinghouse, 1985; Rogers & Silverman, 1998; Clark, 2001; Song & Porath, 2005; Renzulli, 2012; Winebrenner, 2012; Leavitt, 2017; Zanetti, 2019; Novello, 2022; Azzalini, 2023);
- Ability to use questioning and reasoning (Leavitt, 2017; Clark, 2001; Lucangeli, 2019);
- Deep critical thinking and hypercorrection of others' mistakes (Leavitt, 2017; Azzalini, 2023);
- Curiosity (for odd facts), use of invented language and creativity (Morrissey & Brown, 2009; Galbraith 2012; Renzulli 2012; Novello 2018, 2022);
- High phonetics accuracy in both their mother tongue and in foreign languages (Lowe, 2002; Duchovičová, 2007 & 2009), also defined as "*non-perceivable non-nativeness*"⁴ (Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003, cited in Biedrón & Pawlak, 2016);
- Use of Arborescent Thought (Siaud-Facchin, 2019; Azzalini, 2023);
- Difficulties with implicit or double-sense words (Siaud-Facchin, 2019; Azzalini, 2023).

It is worth noting that, as far as *grammar* is concerned, gifted students can easily infer grammar rules from examples (Lowe, 2002; Sousa, 2003; Biedrón & Pawlak, 2016; Novello, 2022), using a deductive reasoning strategy:

Many of them are equipped with analytic abilities since they enjoy discovering grammar rules and 'cracking the code'. (Biedrón & Pawlak, 2016:166)

⁴ Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson "introduced the term non-perceivable non-nativeness to describe (gifted) apparent native-likeness, or a level of proficiency which cannot be distinguished from native in everyday communication and can only be identified through systematic examination". (In: Biedrón & Pawlak, 2016:162)

Many children who are linguistically gifted feel a need for grammatical analysis in addition to rote learning because they are not satisfied with the mere imitative repetition of conventional phrases. (Franklin & Friedl, 1973:5)

This is also linked to the concept of owing deep logical structures of thinking and of making inferences:

We begin to understand why grammar is so appropriate for gifted kids. Grammar gives kids a way to think about language, to see what language reveals about their own minds, to think about how language makes clarity, to think about how different authors use language in their own styles, to think about crafting the language of their own sentences. (Thompson, 2006:7)

For this reason, in the language classroom, it is important to face grammar concepts and exercises in a creative and stimulating way, as Thompson points out:

Grammar [...] has symmetries and mysteries enough to fascinate the dullest mind, and is an introspective and metacognitive way of thinking about our own ideas – perfect for the higher level ruminations advocated for gifted children. (Thompson, 2002:64)

All the traits mentioned above indicate that verbally gifted students can easily reach a proficiency level in both their mother tongue and in foreign languages while they are in their secondary school studies. In addition, they could start to learn and explore languages such as Chinese, Japanese or Ancient Greek which goes beyond mere school subjects and sounds appealing and more challenging in terms of their construction, syntax, history, characters, culture, etc.

Beyond formal language aspects which have already been associated to giftedness, there are also some decisive reasons for connecting verbal abilities to giftedness in adolescence.

In a very interesting contribution, Hanna David (2018) defines some problems which are crucial to gifted adolescents but common to the non-gifted. Indeed, language is the mean for dealing, for example, with *philosophical issues and existential questions* (5). Asking pertinent questions and discussions about God, life after death, the need to obey social or ethical rules is not only a way to elicit verbal ability but to raise personal, critical thinking in order to reinforce one's own personality. The same can be done for issues such as the problem of *parental authority and setting boundaries* or the *inability to accept injustice and inequity* (6).

In matter of justice, if the feeling was already present in childhood, it starts to reach its peak during adolescence, as the awareness and the freedom to decide for themselves make gifted adolescents even more active and informed:

[...] their intensity increases with age and many gifted adolescents become more involved in activities such as joining groups active in equality advancing, getting justice to minorities, fighting for animals' rights, publishing materials about morality, and the like. (David, 2018:7)

In the same way, language is the mean to express *intensity and over-excitability*.

For all the reasons mentioned above, verbal talent has to be constantly nurtured by reading or through meaningful conversations or experiences (and the gifted individual often searches for significant people and books throughout her/his life). On this matter, particularly referring to the child, but true also for adolescents, Thompson explains:

Verbal talent is developed by new verbal experience. It will not develop on its own, and it will not develop if the only experiences a child has are within the child's existing range of verbal experience. [...] Verbal talent will develop when a child is thrown into verbal situations that he or she can't do, doesn't understand, hasn't seen before, forcing the child to stop, think, listen, pay attention, reread, study, change. [...] Only verbal experience that changes a child develops a child. (Thompson, 2006:1)

Indeed, the exposure to a variety of new, complex, and meaningful sources (both written and spoken) is a way to nurture the mind of the verbally gifted without wasting her/his talent as it could happen if in touch with ordinary or mass language contacts.

3. Classroom Inclusive Teaching Strategies to Raise Verbal Ability

In order to enhance and respect all the peculiar cognitive and emotive traits that a verbally gifted learner embodies, a teacher has to adopt some appropriate teaching strategies.

In the following table, retrieved from Azzalini (2024:86), the main aspects to avoid or to enhance in a language classroom with (potentially) gifted students are briefly listed:

TO AVOID	TO ENHANCE
- An exclusive traditional teaching and learning (<i>teacher-centred</i>), where the teacher acts as a unique ‘giver’ of knowledge; - A lesson based and structured only around the textbook, without additional materials or challenging activities; - Superficial or common ‘sources of inspiration’, e.g. the football player, the singer, the influencer, etc.;	- A teaching based on students’ needs and competences (<i>student-centred</i>), and on the cognitive processes involved in language learning;⁵ - Constant meaningful exchanges and feedback between teachers and students; - Cooperative learning and (possibly) co-teaching; - Authentic materials (Santipolo, 2014) and (possibly) authentic contexts;

⁵ For a detailed reading on the cognitive processes involved in language learning, see Novello (2022:70-77).

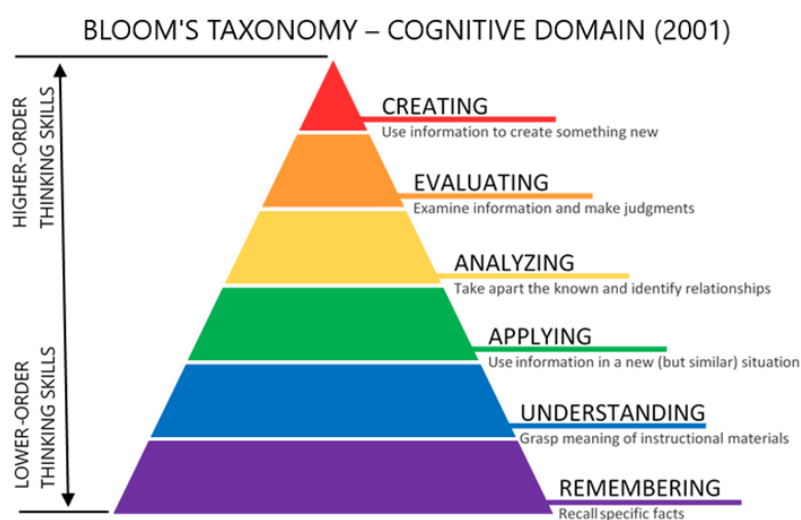
- Strict and structured classroom space.	- Flexible and adaptable classroom space.
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In the following paragraphs, three examples of teaching strategies for gifted (and non-gifted) students are discussed.

3.1 Bloom's Taxonomy

If a teacher has to enhance the ability of QUESTIONING and REASONING, an interesting strategy can be referred to Bloom's taxonomy, here reported for its visual efficacy.

Beyond being divided into lower-order and higher-order thinking skills, Bloom enumerates a list of actions (verbs) which goes from the most superficial to the deepest level of questioning. Each action is here summarised and proposed in the light of giftedness, to be used as samples in a regular language classroom.



It is worth claiming that even the first three levels (lower-order thinking skills) can be applied to giftedness, but in depth. Indeed, a gifted student

is able to recall facts, basic concepts, historical dates or events in a very precise and meticulous way. So, even the basic level of the pyramid can acquire more consistency if read in the light of the Highly Ables.

Level	Action (from the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching) ⁶
1.	To remember = to recall facts or basic concepts. Ability to <i>define, list, memorise, repeat, state, etc.</i>
2.	To understand = to explain ideas and concepts. Ability to <i>classify, describe, discuss, explain, recognise, translate, etc.</i>
3.	To apply = to use information in new situations. Ability to <i>execute, implement, solve, demonstrate, etc.</i>
4.	To analyse = to draw connections among ideas. Ability to <i>differentiate, compare, contrast, examine, distinguish, etc.</i>
5.	To evaluate = to justify a position or a decision Ability to <i>argue, defend, judge, select, support, value, critique, etc.</i>
6.	To create = to produce new or original works Ability to <i>design, construct, develop, formulate, investigate, etc.</i>

3.2 The Socratic Circle

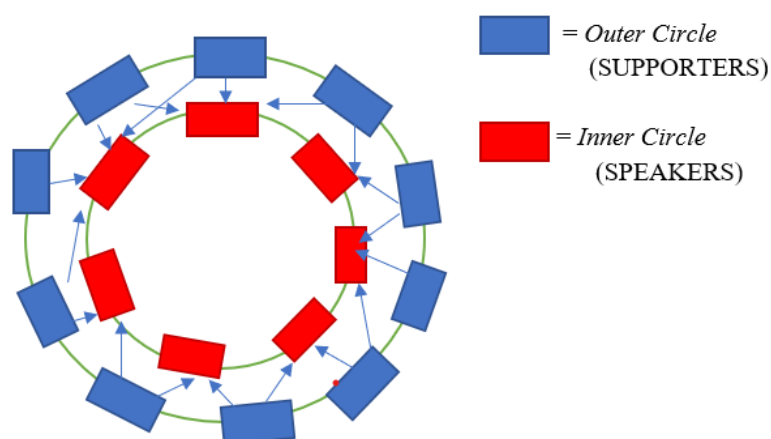
In the collocation 'Socratic Circle', both terms are worth to be briefly defined. 'Socratic' obviously recalls Socrates, the Greek philosopher devoted to the tradition of deep thought; 'circle' refers to the

⁶ Vanderbilt Center for Teaching, 2016, retrieved from: <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/>

geometrical shape where all its points (here the students) have the same distance from the centre. In just two words, the embedded nature of the Socratic Circle is explained: a methodology where all students, sitting on two concentric circles, are of equal importance. In this position, gifted and non-gifted students are asked to discuss and question about important topics.

According to Bovo and Pedron:

The Socratic Seminar can be used as a didactic methodology of cooperative learning which is based on discussion and dialogic exchange, and which allows to 'reason together' on a given topic. It can be used with the whole classroom or with small groups of high potential students as a differentiation strategy.⁷ (Bovo & Pedron, cited in Lucangeli, 2020:10)



⁷ 'Il seminario socratico può essere utilizzato come una metodologia didattica di apprendimento cooperativo che si concentra sul confronto e sullo scambio dialogico e permette di "ragionare insieme" su un determinato argomento. Può essere utilizzato con l'intera classe o con piccoli gruppi di alunni ad alto potenziale cognitivo come strategia di differenziazione'. (Bovo e Pedron, in Lucangeli, 2020:10)

Indeed, the Socratic Circle is based on logic assumptions and questioning, and each topic suggested by the teacher (hence the Moderator) can be further explored and reasoned through meaningful questions. In the Inner Circle (the smallest), students discuss and debate a topic, while in the Outer Circle (the largest), students follow the verbal production of the Inner Circle providing final feedback. The teacher, through her/his role of moderator, can facilitate or intervene during the discussion. Then groups of students are supposed to exchange in order to try both roles. According to LaVonda:

The use of Socratic Circles can help students learn how to think critically, analyze information, and evaluate others' ideas as well as their own. Students also become well versed using conceptual background knowledge to understand a topic, helping them become better problem solvers and evaluators of information. (La Vonda, cited in Danielian *et al.*, 2018:56)

Considering high potential students, such a technique fits perfectly with the nature of the gifted, where questioning, thinking critically, analysing, and evaluating are common strategies used while processing information. In addition, historical, social, and economic facts or events can be read through questions: in this way, the teacher is not a traditional “dispenser” of knowledge but rather a mediator who proposes a thought-provoking question and oversees the discussion of two prepared, autonomous groups of students.

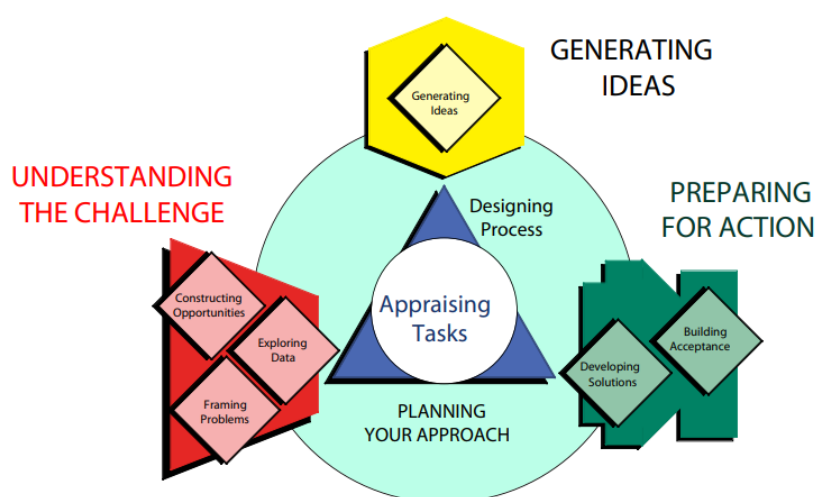
3.3 Creative Problem Solving

Positioned between logic and creativity, the *Creative Problem-Solving* (CPS) ability and methodology will be analysed in this section, starting from the assumption that inventiveness is the first cognitive step to undertake in order to solve a problem. Many aspects relate CPS to giftedness and talent, as it presents a dynamic way or process which can be applied individually or cooperatively in order to solve a real problem through creative thinking.

According to Treffinger and Isaksen (2005),

A contemporary approach to teaching and applying CPS in programming for talent development involves a rich tapestry of cognitive skills and tools, personal characteristics and styles, a supportive environment, attention to outcomes that extend beyond recognition and recall, and opportunities to work on real-life problems and challenges. (Treffinger & Isaksen, 2005:350)

Specifically, a Creative Problem-Solving activity is structured according to three steps which are retrieved and summarised from the complete CPS Version 6.1 TM:



**The Creative Problem Solving Framework
(CPS Version 6.1™)**

© 2010, Center for Creative Learning, Inc. and Creative Problem Solving Group, Inc.

The CPS framework. Retrieved from: [CPSVersion61.pdf](https://creativelarning.com/CPSVersion61.pdf)
(creativelarning.com)

Type of Component	Description
Component 1 UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE	The starting point of a CPS has to be a challenging problem which implies many possible real solutions. This phase can be divided into three subgroups: 1- Constructing opportunities; 2- Exploring data; 3- Framing problems.
Component 2 GENERATING IDEAS	From this perspective, according to Treffinger <i>et al.</i> , this phase corresponds to: An open, exploration or search for ideas, in which you generate many ideas (fluency in thinking), varied ideas and new perspectives (flexibility), and unusual or novel ideas (originality), and then focus your thinking by identifying ideas with interesting or exciting potential to refine, develop, and put to use. (Treffinger <i>et al.</i> , 2003:4)
Component 3 PREPARING FOR ACTION	In this phase, all workable, real, and possible solutions or actions to the previous thinking components have to be taken into account. The action phase must be the most possible plausible.

4. Conclusion

It is important (for both gifted and non-gifted students) that teaching strategies which are innovative and inclusive are implemented, in order

to make lessons more captivating and challenging in comparison to traditional ones.

The previous examples and activities are only three among many that can help students to optimise their intelligence. Researchers on giftedness underline that approximately 5% of the population may be categorised as gifted or highly able. In a study conducted by Azzalini (2023) on 54 upper secondary school students, thanks to these innovative teaching strategies, five of them exceeded the 'normal' level. In percentage, this represents a 9.25% of the total number of students, an outcome that almost doubles the statistics. This means that a high-quality complex teaching can raise the level of the whole class, enhancing verbal talent.⁸

If teaching is viewed as a mission to enhance the potential of and assist every single student to blossom according to her/his abilities, it is worthwhile to conclude with Lucangeli's recommendation⁹:

Every one of us, adults, therefore, have a great task: to be the best possible catalysts of human functions. (2020:44)

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⁸ Complete data analysis and findings are recently published in: Azzalini, A. (2024), *Le lingue e il talento. Un percorso nella plusdotazione verbale con esempi operativi per la scuola secondaria di secondo grado*. Erickson, University and Research, Trento.

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