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BAKUNIN'S SON, A DIALOGIC NOVEL BY SERGIO ATZENI



O FILHO DE BAKUNIN, UM ROMANCE DIALÓGICO DE SERGIO ATZENI

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Abstract

Bakunin's Son, a short novel by Sergio Atzeni, is the perfect embodiment of Bakhtin's theory of the dialogic novel. The author sets his stories and characters - mostly humble outcast defeated people - in his own homeland, Sardinia. The accurately planned structure as an interview to thirty-two people reflects a multifarious reality with its complex rules and mentality expressed through different points of view, languages and ideologies. The protagonist's story may result contradictory according to the different opinions of people who met him. Also the choice of a hybrid language contributes to create a highly connoted cultural context. In Bakunin's Son, in fact, the Italian and the Sardinian overlap in a manner that cannot be distinguished or graphically marked, since form and meaning are fused together.

Resumo

O romance breve de Sergio Atzeni, *O filho de Bakunin*, è a perfeita exemplificação da teoria bachtiniana do romance polifónico. O autor insere as histórias e as personagens, geralmente abatidas, pessoas humildes e marginalizadas, na sua terra natal, a Sardenha. A história è estruturada na forma de entrevista a trinta e duas personagens que com os seus pontos de vista criam uma realidade multi-facetada e subjectiva. A vida de Tullio Saba, o protagonista, está narrada às vezes em modo contraditório e, por isso, os factos podem ser divergentes nas opiniões de quem esteve mais ou menos em contacto directo com ele. O uso característico de um instrumento linguístico híbrido, a meio caminho entre o italiano e o sardo, conota não somente o léxico mas também a estruturação inteira do discurso que atinge o efeito final pretendido pelo autor de descrever uma diversa realidade antropológico-cultural.

Entradas para indexação

KEYWORDS: Dialogic Novel. Hybrid Language

PALAVRAS CHAVE: Romance Polifónico. Instrumento Linguístico Híbrido.

Texto integral

The world is full of other people's words

(M. M. Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, 1984, p.200)

Bakunin's Son, a short novel by Sergio Atzeni¹, is the perfect embodiment of Bakhtin's theory of the dialogic novel. We usually read a novel for the pure pleasure to be temporarily invaded by a story, an atmosphere, a world. Only afterwards, when the book is shut, we start thinking how it is possible that we are still enthralled by it. Of course, each reading experience is unique and reflects our personal ideas and expectations; we interpret and multiply the meanings emerging from the words. Sergio Atzeni set his stories and characters - mainly humble outcast defeated people - in Sardinia, his own homeland. They cover different times, from the prehistoric nuragic era² in *Passavamo sulla terra leggeri*³, to the stories of miners in the 20th century in *Il figlio di Bakunin*⁴, the urban life of marginalized people in *Il quinto passo è l'addio*⁵, and the stories told from young

1 Sergio Atzeni, a writer and a journalist, born in Sardinia in 1952 and prematurely dead in 1995.

2 The 'Nuraghes' are typical stone buildings in Sardinia, probably used as fortifications 3,000/4,000 years ago.

3 Novel published in 1996, its title may be translated as: *Sar'd, The Light Dancers*.

4 *Bakunin's Son*, first published in 1991. This article refers to the 2000 edition.

5 Published in 1995, the title may be translated as: *It's the 5th Step, Goodbye*.

adolescents' viewpoints about their lost and squalid society in *Bellas Mariposas*⁶. Bakhtin brilliantly expressed the concept of heteroglossia, the phenomenon that characterises the novel and any kind of orchestrated narration. The novelist has accurately planned in advance the final effect: a multifarious reality delivered through the use of the various characters' points of view, languages, ideologies, actions and intentions. Sergio Atzeni's effective language sounds like a perfect instrument that conveys deep cultural and subjective motifs with words, structures and peculiar accents. The final outcome is a hybrid language, apparently standard Italian but full of nuances that reveal an underlying different language and meaning, another sensibility, other cultural rules and mentality. In the specific case of *Bakunin's Son*, the Italian language and Sardinian Italian overlap in a manner that cannot be distinguished or graphically marked, since their form and content are fused together.

The image of a language conceived as an intentional hybrid is first of all a conscious hybrid (as distinct from a historical, organic, obscure language hybrid); an intentional hybrid is precisely the perception of one language by another language, its illumination by another linguistic consciousness. An image of language may be structured only from the point of view of another language, which is taken as the norm.⁷

A language that is, at the same time, form and meaning, denotative and connotative, community and single individual medium. The centrifugal forces that operate continually in the process of stratification break the fixed rules which unify the national language and open up a new vital communicative potentiality. The changed stress in 'Bakunin' reflects the process of adaptation of the Russian name to the local community language.

The authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape, is dialogized heteroglossia, anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accented as an individual utterance.⁸

Bakhtin's theory of dialogic novel helps greatly to explain how the different narrators' perspectives are organized to convey a fragmented vision of the world. *Bakunin's Son* is narrated by thirty-two characters, one for each chapter: some of them had personally met Tullio Saba, the ever present-absent protagonist, others had only known his story by hearsay. The first one is a woman who had just

6 A collection of short stories published posthumously in 1996. Its title means: Beautiful Butterflies.

7 M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination, Four Essays*, 1981, p. 359

8 Idem, p. 272

dreamt of him: he was sad and as pale as death and frightened. She affirms he was a good boy, a miner, a comrade, perhaps a party leader, a bit crazy too! This narrator addresses to her son: “Tonight I have dreamt of Tullio Saba ... never told you of him? He courted me after the war. But I liked your father best ... your father never asked me about him ... you are more jealous although.”⁹ She admits to have only a partial knowledge of people and facts: “ I don’t know all the facts, and even if I knew them, what’s the use of it ... I have a messy muddled way to tell stories, I twist all the threads.”¹⁰ The readers like eavesdroppers enter a small community world whose members, we discover, are the guardians of ancient traditions, where the dead and the living are in regular communication in dreams.

Unexpectedly, the following three narrators from Guspini¹¹, the village where the interviewer was directed by the woman to get more details, had no idea of Tullio Saba. They had never met him; nevertheless they do feel like telling something, at least other stories of other people in the village, just to have a few words. So we get immersed in a local reality made of anecdotes and nicknames: “that guy who got married to Arremundu Corriazzu’s sister? ... The son of his father’s brother died in the war, but I never met him”¹². The stories continue like in an interview without questions, only answers and monologues. We can imagine probably the only question the interviewer keeps on asking “Do you know Tullio Saba?” but it is not written anywhere and the readers have to guess it. “Saba, the guy who sold wine?/ Not him?”. Obviously the second question follows a negative reply to the first one. Between the two there is a pause, the reader must interpret it as an exchange with the interviewer who presumably denied the fact that Tullio Saba was a wine seller. This second narrator doesn’t give up so easily and keeps on talking, showing off his vast registry repertoire in his mind, relatively large if we think we are in a small village in south Sardinia. So, he spins a series of names and micro-stories: “that one who once killed three rabid dogs in the countryside and found a golden chain?”¹³. Eventually he had to admit the evidence of not knowing him in person. A shame, he could have been a good testimony, as the first narrator promised us, people from Guspini should have a good memory and know everyone. Oral tradition is paramount in this society and Sergio Atzeni knows that too well, he is a perfect master in using the turn-taking speech but he reports only one interlocutor’s words, letting us imagine the missing parts. We can assume there are three interlocutors involved in this discourse where the reader is the third one who co-builds the dialogue, reconstructs it, fills in the blanks, and gives voice to the pauses.

In chapter five we meet a character who had known the protagonist, and she was a close person too! It is the Saba’s ‘servant and cook’, in her own words, who still nurses a profound grudge against her masters, because they were new rich people and, even worst, communist. She can’t accept the way they show off their wealth, something that real wealthy families, who owned ‘land, houses, olive

9 Il figlio di Bakunin, 2004, p. 7, our translation

10 Idem, p.7, our translation

11 A small village in the south-east of Sardinia.

12 Il figlio di Bakunin, 2004:9, our translation

13 Idem, p.9, our translation

trees, fruit trees, sheep, calves, horses, dogs and donkeys¹⁴, never did. “Tullio Saba was a vain child”¹⁵ asserts the woman, Dolores Murtas, in fact, he used to look at himself in the mirror! He always wore fine shiny shoes – his father was a shoemaker we must remember – and elegant dresses. She expresses a sort of popular wisdom when quoting proverbs, giving good advice to demonstrate that village people are expected and they had better keep a low profile. “To be born like Antoni Saba, a servant’s nephew, and to get too big for his boots in golden days, what can be next? Misfortune!”¹⁶. Despite the good economic treatment she received - her salary was as much as a schoolmaster’s - she insists blaming them for their vanity. Dolores is proud of her reputation as a specialist in cooking ‘panadas’¹⁷ and deliberately uses dialect words and phrases to remark her unquestionable belonging to the original community. Instead, she remarks her total distance from those people who are different, like her masters! Antoni Saba was against the king, the pope and government. Her criticism did not spare Antoni’s wife, of course. Lady Margherita was guilty for wearing elegant dresses. The fixed rules of an atavistic society are well embodied by an exemplary landlord, Totoi Zuddas, who deserves the highest praise of the community. By contrast, those people who did not stick to the model, or tried to trespass its limits, sooner or later would be severely punished. Antoni Saba was obliged to shut up his business because of the advent of fascism and later on he committed suicide.

As we continue reading, we meet other characters; some of them admired Tullio’s honesty, others, mainly fascists, condemned him and gave a negative portrait. He was naïve, no doubt, who dreamed to apply anarchist theories to the Sardinian society. He did not realize how much destruction would have proceeded from his ideals, as the Vicar Don Sarais remarkably explains to his congregation: Bakunin was a church antagonist, an arsonist, a cruel criminal.

The eighth narrator reveals some physical details of the interviewer, so we know he is young, long-haired and wears an earring. The ninth narrator tells us her love affair with young Tullio, and she confirms what we already know, that he was a miner and a political leader. Another character, Ulisse, one of Tullio’s closest friends, depicts him as a real hero. The controversial years in Tullio’s life are narrated in chapter thirty-one and we continually waver between considering him a smuggler or a benefactor. Only towards the end of the book, we learn something special about his son: he is the spitting image of his father, same body, same face and eyes, same character. “That’s you!/Why are you turning pale?/Nobody told you before?”¹⁸.

What really makes of Bakunin’s Son a dialogic novel is the plurality of voices that build-up the whole story, each one willing to assert its own truth. In the last chapter, the interviewer, the thirty-second narrator, concludes the novel with these words:

14 Il figlio di Bakunin 2004, p.16, our translation

15 Idem, p. 15, our translation

16 Idem, p. 16, our translation

17 Traditional pies filled with eels or meat

18 Il figlio di Bakunin, 2004:125, our translation

This is the end of what we know about Tullio Saba through the recollections of the people who had met him. I recorded every single word they said with my Aiwa¹⁹, and I transcribed exactly what I recorded with no changes. I don't know if it is true, or even if truth exists. Perhaps some narrators did consciously lie. Or everyone just told what they thought to be true. Probably they invented some details just for the love of telling good stories. Or more likely the veil of memory has blurred and slowly transformed facts into lies, as it usually happens with narrators as well as with historians.²⁰

We know that ancient communities have an innate talent for telling stories and this explains why each member feels entitled to complete and integrate real life by adding extra details, for fun, pastime or simply to satisfy their urgent need to narrate.

... all languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making them unique, are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own object, meaning and values. As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically. As such they encounter one another and co-exist in the consciousness of real people – first and foremost, in the creative consciousness of people who write novels. As such, these languages live a real life, they struggle and evolve in an environment of social heteroglossia.²¹

Sergio Atzeni's novels contain all the typical elements of the twentieth century narrative: low register, plurilinguism, informality, dialogic style, alienation, antirealism, which depict the ever changing reality of our contemporary world. The case of the Italian language is still emblematic, after 150 years from its political unification. It has never replaced the pre-existing languages, despite the massive policy of imposing the national standard language carried out for many years, in many ways, until recently. In fact, throughout Italy, regional languages, dialects or hybrid versions of Italian, have survived and continue to be spoken reinforcing and reasserting their cultural identity.

The resistance of a unitary, canonic language, of a national myth bolstered by a yet-unshaken unity, is still too strong for

19 A popular electronic equipment brand until 2002

20 Sergio Atzeni, 2004:127, our emphasis, our translation.

21 M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination, Four Essays*, 1981, p. 291-2

heteroglossia to relativize and de-center literary and language consciousness. This verbal-ideological de-centering will occur only when a national culture loses its sealed-off and self-sufficient character, when it becomes conscious of itself as only one among other cultures and languages. ... 22

'I am Sardinian, Italian, and European' Sergio Atzeni used to repeat proudly while wandering in Italy and Europe. But he always felt well rooted in his small island. It is probably this awareness of belonging simultaneously to the vast western society and to his small original community that inspired his novel *Bakunin's Son*, based on the search for identity.

On his official site, we can read:

His writing style is profoundly and culturally linked and rooted in his island. His consciously felt diversity does not shut out the rest of the world; on the contrary, it makes him aware of his pluri-ethnic identity. In his style languages are interwoven to create new musical effects and rhythm.²³

In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*²⁴, we can find the most appropriate definition of the narrative technique used by the thirty-two narrators in *Bakunin's Son*: 'quasi-direct speech', a midway technique between direct and indirect speech, a hybrid speech the author uses to express the characters' ideas and states of mind. These features allowed to easily adapt the novel to the stage, as in the performance directed by Gaetano Marino in 1997. "They are the characters of an unfinished drama, at the end we learn their destiny belongs not only to them but to the whole community which lives the different ages of our time."²⁵

There is also an interesting film adaptation by Gianfranco Cabiddu where the visual and emotional features of the novel give the impression that the narrated events of the past are happening right there, under our eyes. While in the novel, the protagonist is surrounded by a legendary aura and the reader intervenes to fill in the information gaps; in the film, instead, nothing is left to imagination. What strikes in all versions, and it is clearly stated, is the 'hero' who gives voice to the misery of the defeated people, the miners of yesterday and of today²⁶!

In recent years, the emphasis of literary criticism has shifted from the attempt to analyse discourses to reading interpretation. Structuralism and post-structuralism had already undermined the idea of the author as the unique origin of the text when Bakhtin's works entered the literary studies. Today, as affirmed

22 M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination, Four Essays*, 1981, p. 370

23 www.sergioatzeni.com, our translation.

24 V.N. Volosinov, 1973, pp. 141-159

25 www.gaetanomarino.net/spettacoli/bakunin/presentazione.htm, our translation

26 http://video.tiscali.it/immagini/Notizie/La_protesta_dei_minatori_del_Sulcis_prima_notte_a_375_metri.m32084/476579.html

by David Lodge, we are 'after Bakhtin', not only because his works were published posthumously in 1975, but because "he anticipated the interest of linguistics" (Lodge, 1990, p. 89), as it happens in discourse analysis theory. Bakunin's *Son* presents a world full of other people's words (Bakhtin, 1984) which is the perfect fusion of the author's discourse and his characters'. The readers, instead of being told a story, are listening to different viewpoints, each one with its own prejudices or ironies, and are obliged to construct their own hypothesis.

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