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LANGUAGE AND STEREOTYPE IN ANGLO-IRISH LITERATURE

My imperfect English as well as my feeling of newness and strangeness to the life around me made me a listener and spectator rather than a sharer in what was going forward. The children talked of their friends and acquaintances and amusements. I knew nothing of it all, and missed a great deal of what was said through not understanding their rapid speech.

Rosa Mulholland, *Giannetta*

Adjacent to the men's public urinal they perceived an icecream car round which a group of presumably Italians in heated altercation were getting rid of voluble expressions in their vivacious language in a particularly animated way, there being some little differences between the parties. -Puttana madonna, che ci dia i quattrini! Ho ragione? Culo rotto! Intendiamoci MEZZO SOVRANO PIU. DICE LUI, PERO! MEZZO. FARABUTTO! MORTACCI SUI! MA ASCOLTA! CINQUE LA TESTA PIU...¹
[Eumaeus, Episode 16] James Joyce, *Ulysses*¹

Joyce's somewhat ironic use of the Italian language to depict two ice-cream sellers Stephen and Bloom happen to meet in their wanderings through the city of Dublin is probably one of the most notable examples of characterisation of Italians in Anglo-Irish literature.

Joyce was well documented on the Dublin Italian presence which he went on to refer to in his work: the 'italianos', as he calls them, who are mostly 'icecreamers and friers in the fish way not to mention the chip potato variety and so forth over in little Italy there near the Coombe'² who are after all generously defined as 'sober thrifty hardworking fellows' are fictional yet they mirror the well-established reality of Italians in Ireland. At the time Joyce was writing *Ulysses*, in Ireland 40 people called Forte and 19 called Fusco were involved in the sale of ice-creams and coffee.

From ice-cream sellers and 'chippers' (i.e. those who run a fish and chip shop), Italians living in Ireland have certainly climbed the social ladder in these last days. This is in

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some way reflected in their literary representations, as they do seem to have lost those traits which were typically stereotypic.

Inevitably linked to the history of Italians in Ireland, such portrayals are in fact being modified by the changes Irish economy has experienced during the last sixty years.

I will try, through a diachronic perspective, to detect the reasons for a modified use of the character of Italians and of the Italian language in either the expression of a cultural identity or simply the construction of a cliché image.

I propose to have a look at the identity discourse and the thought that has engendered it, apart from the language in which this has been expressed. Language is the ultimate emblem of national identity.

The question as to what makes an Italian foreign precedes the question as to how this foreignness has been portrayed, in what language the distinction between the self, that is the Irish, and the other, that is the Italian, has been made. In view of such an opinion, it will be clear that one of the best ways for some of the Irish writers I will be dealing with to emphasize the foreignness of Italians is to make them talk ‘foreign’.

In practice, such as a strategy would hardly be practicable.

A writer wanting to introduce a foreign-language speaking character will soon be confronted with a complication: his/her story is a verbal art form in which words, besides shaping the content, also communicate the content.

Although foreignness could be conveyed by putting some strange vocabulary into the character’s mouth, the very strangeness would probably block any further communication, both between the foreign character and native characters, and between the story and the reader. The Italian thus represented could never develop into a ‘character’ in the literary sense of the word: his/her story can be told, but not understood.

The question therefore is: can Italian native speakers function in Anglo-Irish texts? How do some Irish writers present an Italian-speaking character in their text?

They can do so in different ways:

- first, as English-speaking go-betweens, hence speaking in English and being more or less plausible bilingualists;
- second, with words remaining in English but being stressed and pronounced with a heavy accent;

- third, speaking in their own language, i.e. Italian, saying words Italian-sounding;
- forth, as foreigners with no language at all, in the background even though sometimes described or referred to;
- fifth, using hybrid forms of language made up of Anglicised Italian words or Italianate English ones (an example is ‘costumera’, that is ‘customers’).

Several options are then explored by authors aiming to introduce Italians in their stories.

If we look at Anglo-Irish literature written during the last sixty years we find a good number of Irish writers, travellers, historians and scholars, willing to reflect in their works their opinions concerning the character of Italians, opinions which are bound to be subjective and affected by religious, political or personal prejudice, without this signifying that they are not faithful or that they are all necessarily negative.

However, as is only to be expected, allusions to, projections of, the Italian character in creative writing – which is what I will be focusing on – tend to be critical.

When certain features are repeatedly insisted on in writings, they tend, taken together, to produce stereotypes, or ‘fixed mental impressions’ as the OED defines them.

To a very large extent, stereotypes are inherited, that is socially transmitted, and they are often part of the cultural beliefs held by one’s own group. However, inherited stereotypes, contrary to what most critics think, are also subject to change: they can be revitalised and revised. And when they are so, they can also be referred to as imagotypes.

Ethnic or national stereotypes and their literary representations of intercultural confrontations are deployed in many different ways: ironically or seriously, xenophobically or exotistically. Whatever the modality of their occurrence, they always invoke the audience’s prior knowledge, they always rely on a pre-given recognition value.

The fictional texts in question work within a cultural system which partly determines the way they are understood: their aesthetic meaning is linked to cultural values.

This is the reason why even a surface understanding of the texts I will deal with requires cultural or historical background knowledge.

The intergroup relations problems in Ireland help us better read the history of Italians in Ireland.

The first consistent groups of Italians started to settle in Ireland during the 1880s when the first chipper was opened in the Dublin central area of Pearse Street³. Since then, the presence of Italian migrants has always been prominent. In 1936 there were 325 Italian born registered residents in Dublin. In 1961, there were 689 Italian born residents. The growth of migration flux has been constant and in 1981 the number of immigrants amounted to 1,351. The 2002 Irish census revealed 3,770 people with Italian nationality resident in Ireland.

The following year, the Italian embassy list records about 5,000 Italians resident in Ireland although a more likely estimate is 7,000.

If we then go back to literature, we can notice that many of the representations of Italian migrants focus on the activity of fish and chip shops which they seem to have introduced to Ireland and which they have taken over till recently. For many people in Ireland, fish and chips shops have been associated with Italian migrants, and with Italianess, in general.

Chipper during the winter and ice-cream seller during the summer is one of the main characters of a 1963 short story by Benedict Kiely.

In 'The Enchanted Place' from the collection *A Journey to the Seven Streams*, the Italian Renato speaks through the voice of the unnamed narrator he works with:

Every week that God sends, Renato the Italian hangs up in his shop long, rectangular three-coloured poster telling our town the name of the three films on that week's programme in Petersons's new cinema.⁴

Indirect speeches define Renato's talk as being 'in whispering Italian, vocalic as the songs of angels and strange at the same time.'⁵

Renato, whose foreignness is constantly marked by the repetition of the epithet 'the Italian', which follows his name, is also complacently depicted as one who does not understand English very well, at least all those big words one fellow named Jack McGowan, from the town's amateur dramatic society, uses when talking about going to the pictures.

Despite the fact of sounding strange or having 'never made a success of the English language as we speak it'⁶, Renato is a fascinating character, who, in a sort of ritual gesture, in a place which is extraordinarily enough 'fragrant with the smell of spilt vinegar and fried chips unrolled his sleeves and read out aloud and very slowly the three-coloured poster'.

Reading aloud those titles that are in another language helps the character to make familiar what is other, trying to make an effort, as the narrator reports, towards the end of the story:

he attempted to translate for me the words of some Italian song about love gone right and love gone wrong, about the world quiet and the heart at peace, about the world gone mad, the body burning, the heart in pain.⁷

Despite the language difficulties, Renato, trapped by the charm of the word ‘enchanted’ he finds in the title of a film, goes with the narrator to the cinema. But, disappointed by the film, which is about love and not about mystery – hence intensifying the impossibility of fully understanding another language – as he had wished it to be, he ends by falling asleep, while the narrator more enthusiastically hears a conversation between a girl and a young man having just met and sitting in the row next to them.

Only towards the end, Renato is given the opportunity to draw from his cultural background and use his language, although in a literally translated version which, if retranslated back into Italian, doesn’t sound perfectly natural nor familiarly understandable:

We have a say in Italy. It is everywhere the same. When the world goes to war the women go mad.⁸

Whether Renato refers to the young woman seen at the cinema and disappeared the following day, a real mystery – ‘the sort no detective would ever solve’, the kind he was looking for – or simply to a saying Bernard Kiely heard of, it is not clear.

From a poem by Michael O’Loughlin, titled *Exiles*, in which the double exile of Italian migrants from Italy and within Ireland is narrated, to a short story by Eugene McCabe, Italian chippers then seem to dominate. ‘You will find the Italian chippers in all the dead ends of Dublin’: O’Loughlin’s voice well introduces the four Italian chippers who recur in Eugene McCabe’s short story *Roma*, later adapted for television.

Both the short story and the film script are set in a fish and chip shop owned by Mr Digacimo, who, as the stage directions specify, though born in Portadown, has Italian origins, and by his Italian wife, who ‘speaks little English and cares less, lives her life surrounded by louts, pigs, chips, pots and pans.’



The characterisation of Mrs Digacimo with all her clues both in incorrect Italian and in incorrect English, typical of Italian émigrés of a low social status, bears all the elements of the cultural stereotype. Contrary to her husband who mainly deals with their customers and who claims to prefer the Irish village they live in to the Italian place their family came from, i.e. Sperlonga, Mrs Digacimo seems to well represent a marginal voice that emblemizes what is other, hence beyond the reader's and the audience's understanding, while being sometimes hilariously shareable in its difference. 'The voice said something in their speech', says the distant narrator referring to the woman talking to her teenage daughter named Maria, which culminates with the final comments on Benny, Maria's suitor, from Mrs Digacimo herself, pronounced with a firm tone and typographically distinguished by letters in block capitals and exclamation marks:

BRUTO, BRUTO... [Brute] LOUTS! (*She comes angrily into the shop*), Paulo [*talking to her husband*] is too much, no more [...] Ora BASTA! BASTA!⁹

‘E matto, matto’¹⁰, she insists in one grammatical incorrect scene, causing derisory remarks from her husband who speaks too quickly – as she would later say – leading to a funny scene in which misunderstandings are common: ‘He frightened the child. Poveretta!!!! Poveretta!!!! Paulo, we should get police’ at whose illogical request Digacimo answers: ‘What for? Don’t be stupid, woman.’¹¹

Mrs Digacimo’s exaggerated concern for her daughter, finally expressed by her suggestion to go back to Sperlonga – ‘Poveretta Maria. We should go home to Sperlonga’¹² – only because Maria has been undecidedly and confusingly talked to by a very religious Benny, who decides to leave the village for good, seems to be a trait common to the depiction of one Italian as in a later Irish play by Bernard Farrell¹³.

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The examples dealt with prove that there is no prototypical Italianness that is to be shown. There is no so much an essential Italianness as a basic desire to have such an essentialism at one’s disposal for the strengthening of Irish identity.

If we look for more literary representations of Italianness, their absence in most of recent works is significant. If they are presented, Italians seem to do so more as some sort of an ‘autochthonous foreign’ presence, a little more Irish than other migrant groups. They occupy a more privileged position rather than a marginal one. They probably are still in the background but look more integrated. This is the case of Roddy Doyle’s latest novel *Paula Spenser* where Italians are seen not in a chipper, but in a café¹⁴, almost sending us back to the football atmosphere of Doyle’s earlier *The Van*¹⁵, where Italians were seen behind the counter of a fish and chips van.

Italians, here admired for their darker complexion, and for their cooking abilities¹⁶, hence for more general aspects of their culture, are somewhat easily substituted by Polish and Black people doing the job the Irish protagonist does in order to earn a living, that is cleaning the toilets of public places.

Such a depiction instructs about the workings of both Italian and Irish cultures and about the fundamental changes occurring in Irish society.

Overall, the presence of Italians in Anglo-Irish literature seems to reflect a smooth and successful integration process which is a synonym for cultural pluralism as opposed to the assimilation and amalgamation examples previously given, using the words of a known sociologist, called Newman.

Such representations fulfil the social function of explaining a modified use of the image of Italians which is closely linked to the so-called Celtic Tiger Ireland vast immigration flux of Polish people, as well as of people from Africa and China and which is now characterised by imago-types rather than stereotypes.

¹ 'Son of a bitch, give us the money! Am I right? Asshole! Let be clear, half crown more! 'What' says he. 'Half Rascal!'. The translation is mine. In Joyce's text, words are in Italian. Joyce, James, *Ulysses*, London: Penguin Books, 1992, 715.

² *Ibid.*, p. 451.

³ Power, Una, *Terra Straniera. The Story of Italians in Ireland*, Carlow: National & Leinster, 1988, p. 23. Reynolds, Brian, *Casalattico and the Italian Community in Ireland*, Dublin: UCD Foundation for Italian Studies, 1993, p. 46.

⁴ Kiely, Benedict, 'The Enchanted Place' in *A Journey to the Seven Streams*, London: Methuen, 1963, p. 79.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁹ 'That's enough!'. McCabe, Eugene, *Roma*, Dublin: Turve Press, 1979, p. 38.

¹⁰ 'He is mad, mad.' The verb 'to be' lacks the accent. It should be 'È'. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ The play I am referring to is *Kevin's Bed*, Cork: Mercier Press, 1999.

¹⁴ Doyle Roddy, *Paula Spencer*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2006.

¹⁵ Doyle Roddy, *The Van*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1991.

¹⁶ 'The smell is great. All the different bread and the little pizza things. The salami, all the tomato-covered stuff under and over the glass along the counter. It's gorgeous and nerve-racking. Even the cakes. There's nothing that's just round and normal-looking. She knows the names of none of them.' Doyle, *Paula Spencer*, pp. 32-3.