Le Simplegadi ISSN 1824-5226

Vol. XVIII-No. 20 November 2020 DOI: 10.17456/SIMPLE-152

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This Thing of Darkness I (Now) Acknowledge Mine

I was maybe three or four years old when a woman asked my mother if I were adopted. The reason behind her surprise was that I spoke Italian to my cousins, who were intimidated by my articulate and exclusive way of speaking, which my aunts considered so snobbish.

My mother speaks mostly Neapolitan, my father both Italian and Neapolitan. However, they both shared the same high expectations for my sister and me. The first step was the key for the future, namely the Italian language, a necessity which became more and more urgent after our moving from Campania to Friuli-Venezia Giulia in 2003. They did not want us to speak our own "indigenous" language, for Neapolitan seemed to them a harsh tongue of delinquency, the initial step toward criminality. Hence our parents would speak to us in Neapolitan, and we would reply in Italian. They did not tell us – they did not know – that the Italian language would open the doors before us, closing those behind us. The fact that knowing Italian was, for my parents, a significant hope, unconsciously devalued my perception of Neapolitan, the medium they used themselves. Years later, because of work, I felt, from a practical point of view, the necessity of understanding Venetian, the language all my colleagues would use among themselves. However, I have never felt the urge to learn Friulian, as much as I have never needed Neapolitan: Italian was more than sufficient. Without acknowledging it, I thought that I had to be aware of my own indigenous language. That ferocious and rough tongue appeared to me as a sinister creature whose intention was that of devouring my future – and I accepted the idea. I was an evanescent speaker with an exclusively passive competence of a language which seemed to be as dangerous as inappropriate.

Then Elena Ferrante's books came my way, and so did maturity. To mature consisted in doubting anything which, growing up, I had accepted without asking. Neapolitan changed its face, and so did my perception of it. As I ventured into that precious reading, I saw the protagonists of the Neapolitan novels confronting several issues, some of which I personally knew, and I started to see my own "indigenous" language as a rich, dense and visceral medium. No legislation safeguards Neapolitan, and, in a way, there is no necessity for a law: Campania's significant numbers of speakers – who are most often almost exclusively monolingual, as my mother is – support and protect the language.

Only through education I have learnt that languages are not only externally endowed with culture and heritage, but also an inner instrument through which one can remember and recover one's roots. I have hence recognised the intensity of the Neapolitan language, its rage, its fury and notoriety; but I have also learnt to see its innate melodrama, its tenderness, its humour and its depth – which convinced me to gain possession of my own legacy, one word at a time.

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