

PhD Dissertation Theses

“Sante ’Middje... Je terramute...”

**The literature of Marsica, popular identity and
the earthquake of 1915**

Rosangela Libertini

Supervisor: dr. Puskás István



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

Doctoral School of Literary Studies

Debrecen, 2014

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, when words such as “globalization” and “world culture” express our everyday experiences, and the nations and states of Europe are trying to find their places inside this new situation through studying their relationship to their own past and seeking their way to the future, the question of identity emerges with new force and actuality, considering both the identities of people and those of different communities. In the past two centuries the community of the Italians has been trying to create and reinforce a national unity based on political foundations. However, the demand for and process of constituting a political union was preceded by the creation of a cultural community, which was related to a written culture based on a popular language, the Florentine. First among the humanist writers, then in the circles of the social elite became accepted the concept that language can create the community which has been called ‘Italian’, but not in the sense of the later, politic-based definition of the word. Besides the lingual-cultural unification attempts, various stories and languages were born on the peninsula, thus various local identities, and for this reason it was hard to find a common ground. The language of literature and the “imaginary community” based on it, as we have seen, was supposed to create and unite the cultural-political elite, but the modern national consciousness would have needed a wider social base. As a consequence of such circumstances, the integration of the various local communities into one nation has always been problematic and uncertain. In the early modern ages, that is in the period when modern nations were born, Italy, the bearer of the legacy of the classical western culture, attracted constantly more people, especially educated foreigners and visitors from different parts of Italy, who, led by the revived susceptibility of modernity and driven by the desire of knowing and describing the world, travelling through the peninsula recorded their experiences, then, based on these records, put down accounts of what they had seen. In this period, from these encounters was the exotic image of some Italian regions, especially those of Central and South Italy born: though the region situated on Italian ground was considered the cradle and reference point of western culture, to the visitors it offered a culturally different image, that of a strange world. The accounts of these foreign visitors enhanced even further the sense of cultural diversity, and affected the self-concept and identity of local communities as well. Not even the unification of the Italian peninsula (executed by the Savoy Dynasty of Piedmont) managed to improve the situation, what is more, according to certain interpretations, it made it even worse, widening the gap between the different local cultures, and between North and South.

2. Contemporary researches concerning Italian cultural identities

In the academic discourse within the cultural-political context of the unified Italy, Antonio Gramsci was the first to raise the question of the missing national unity and disintegration in the fascist Italy between the two world wars, just as he was the one who pointed out how the cultural-political powers work within the country's borders and it was him again who came up with the concept that the question of power can be considered a cultural question at the same time. The systematic research of the connections of the western world and the civilizations outside of it, especially the East, started in the second part of the 20th century; its first important theoretician was Edward W. Said, who used many of Gramsci's thoughts as points of reference in his theory of orientalism. Thanks to Said's work the method known as postcolonial school - the theory which studies the encounter of different cultures, civilizations and the effects they have on each other, mainly in the context of Europe and the former colonies - started to flourish. The aim of the rather diversified researches is the understanding of one of the most crucial problems of the present world, and, as a result, the proposal of eventual solutions based on the experiences. However, the results and the methods of the postcolonial school today are not applied only to the classical colonial context, but also to studies of numerous other situations, when two communities, cultures step into a hierarchical, dominant-submissive relationship. In Italy, the centre of the local application of the method can be found in Naples, at the University L'Orientale: the Postcolonial Studies Research Centre partly carries out classical postcolonial researches (including the research of the history of Italian colonization), but its horizon is wider than that, and is endeavouring to apply the method even inside the national culture, mainly to the North-South problem. One of the starting points of our work is the conference entitled "Humanism of cohabitation: the dialogue of Said and Gramsci: workshop of civilian conversations", held in 2005, and the volume of studies published after the conference, which on the one hand makes the relationship of Gramsci and Said, thus the relations of the postcolonial discourse clear, on the other hand it points out the relevance of the method in connection with the researches concerning Italian culture. Another protagonist of the memory and identity studies is Maurice Halbwachs, who theorized collective memory, and who claims that not only a person, but a certain group or community can have its own memory, which is not self-relevant, but keeps such past events alive, which can be useful for a certain community also in the present. There exists another school, the founder of which is Pierre Nora, who connected the concepts of collective

memory and sites of memory, claiming that places, dates, or people are important for the identity of a community, let it be because of the unity of belonging to a tribe, nation or race, or for various other interests.

Among others, the sites of memory theory was researched by Jan Assmann, and in Italy by Ugo Fabietti and Vincenzo Matera - from theoretical and general aspects -, and as far as the Italian context is concerned, a serious, three-volume work edited by Mario Insnenghi deals with it, including the studies of several Italian historians and psychologists.

3. Subject and aims of dissertation

Within the limits of this very rich subject that has many other questions to research, our study concentrates on a very narrow and special area, that is Marsica, part of Central Italy, connected to the Abruzzo region from the administrative, but also from the historical and cultural points of view. The title of the dissertation in the avezzano-marsica dialect, „Sante Middije... Je terramute!”, so „Virgin Mary... The earthquake!”, as a lingual sign refers to the mentioned area of Italy, but not only to the region, but also to the culture and local identity of it. The subtitle, “The literature of Marsica, popular identity and the earthquake of 1915” emphasizes the interrelatedness of the phenomena of literature, memory and identity, and thus marks the direction of the research, which concentrates on this net, as the aim of the present dissertation is to study the region not only from the historical and social points of view, but from the literary as well, considering the fact that the identity-constituting role of the Marsican literature has never been subject of scientific research.

4. Research methodology

In order to reach our goal, that is to uncover the relationship between an Italian regional identity, the Marsican identity, and the local literature and memory, in the first place we studied two types of literature connected to Marsica.

In the first part the thesis deals with “the words of another world”, that is with the presence of Abruzzo and Marsica in literary discourses outside of it, starting from Boccaccio, going through the literature of the 19th century to the literature of the 20th century, emphasizing that for the eye of the other, Abruzzo (and Marsica in it) represents the image created by the other from his/her point of view. At this point we compare this image to the one described by Edward W. Said when he reconstructs and analyses the image that the colonizing Europe creates about the southern and eastern part of the world (and its relation to it), with the conclusion that the image of Marsica and that of the East - regarded as culturally alien - has many features in common concerning the substantial elements. In the second part of the first big chapter we talk about the earlier and contemporary authors who approached Marsica not from an outer aspect - from the point of view of the other -, but from the inside; about those who made and make Marsica the subject of their narratives, so who are parts and creators of the life of the local cultural identity. Among these authors one of the most important is Ignazio Silone, whose world-famous novels taking place in Marsica not only show us this inner point of view (to be more precise, the mixture of this inner point of view and the outer point of view represented by the Italian national language), but, as a consequence, they had a significant role in forming the identity of the local community. In the working process we took into consideration two factors: firstly, reading and analyzing literary texts, making use of the results of the already available literary researches (in case of Silone). Secondly, analyzing the data collected on the spot, pieces of information from the members of the literary life (authors and institutions) of Marsica.

In the second part of the thesis - after having presented in the first part the written culture connected to Marsica -, we are studying the literary memory of the earthquake of 1915. In a brief excursus we re-visit the connections between memory and sign, memory and identity. From the factors helping to define identity we emphasize two: literature and sites of memory, as in our consideration these two factors - as it can be seen from studied example -, fill their identity-constituting role in a strongly interrelated manner. In our opinion, the literature of Marsica and the Earthquake of Avezzano of 1915, as a site of memory, are strongly related to each other; the earthquake itself became an important part of the self-concept of the population in the past century and still plays an important role in it.

As this question has never been subject to any academic research, we analysed directly the literary sources also in this case, and, while reading the texts, we made use of the theories and methods already applied in international academic discourses, with special regard to cultural

studies, postcolonial studies, and other theories studying the literary representations of cultural memory. When choosing the texts that we wanted to analyse in the thesis, the main point was the earthquake theme, so we did not differentiate them on the basis of their reputation (there are texts known only on the local level, but also some that had national, or even international success), as we are focusing only on the Marsican context.

All this in order to show why authors have always returned to the event, to that historical moment from which they are definitely separated by time and even from a cultural point view: we can find the answer in the strong need for identity, for self-definition. As a conclusion we talk about those lingual-cultural moments that are not part of the literary discourse, but surrounding it, complementing it, they work together on keeping the earthquake a living memory, a site of memory and an identity-constituting element until today.

5. Results and conclusion

The thesis studies the relations of literature, cultural memory and community identity in the Italian Marsica, which, thanks to its marginal situation, offers a good opportunity for revealing the interactions, relations between the Italian national literature and culture and local formations.

The thesis claims that written culture has a crucial role in treating events that are important for a community in a special cultural (or political) situation, in getting over traumas, and - connected to these factors -, in creating and putting into play – in the 20th century modernity – the identity-constituting role of the memory of events. It can be clearly seen through Marsica's example that memory gives a significant motivation for the birth and life of local written culture, which can reinforce the identity of the community by its pure existence.

We hope that one of the results of our research will be to get a more profound knowledge of a less renowned slice of Italian literature, which, on the one hand, forms the discourse of the national literature (sometimes working along with it, sometimes moving away from it), producing the pendulum effect well-known from the postcolonial theory, so it can be understood from the horizon of the national literature, on the other hand one of its most important tasks is to reinvigorate local cultural identity instead of, or besides the national one. Until today the Italian identity research concentrated mainly on the question of national identity, and only recently, with the nation concept becoming gradually more problematic, has the attention turned towards local communities, cultural units; but Abruzzo, Marsica has been

a blind spot from this point of view. The aim of the thesis is to make affirmations in connection with the literary articulation of Marsican identity through the earthquake theme, as an example. During the working process, texts of different genres and qualities were put together, showing thus an example for rethinking the traditional, national-based canon creating method - and its activity of setting up a hierarchy based on value judgements -, furthermore, an example for elaborating another way of reading and systemizing the texts, a new method, which considers as its field not the national frame, but the local context, and within it sets up its research horizon (besides having in sight all the time the national culture as a reference point).

As a result of the research, we can draw the picture of the local literary corpus, and furthermore, also its relation to the national, and even to the international literary context: the place and functioning of texts become visible within the life of the local community. It is not an aim of the thesis to make a list of the elements and factors that constitute the Marsican identity, it concentrates only on one element, that is literature, and more precisely, on the literature about the earthquake theme, trying to show its significance. Re-reading the texts from this special aspect can contribute to removing certain texts from the net of the long-time fixed readings, in order to give new horizons to e.g. Silone's works, always interpreted from the aspect of the Marxist, left-wing political activism - and to show its relevance of other kind. In the same way the thesis is reasoning for the concept shared by the postcolonial theory and cultural studies - but in the Italian academic life not yet emphasized -, that literary texts - besides their primary intentions, stated messages and reading codes - often tell about the surrounding context that created them, its self-image and relation to the outside world. The thesis wants to connect with the gradually more vivid academic discourse of identity research in Italy, concentrating on one of the less studied areas of the country. The results we hope for is on the one hand a growing attention towards other regions, on the other hand further researches of our subject, Marsica: further studies about the local self-definition and cultural life from our aspect - after this positive example.

6. Fields of application of the research

The thesis - which offers new approaches from several points of view - is a contribution to the identity and sites of memory studies, and thus helps with making more profound and detailed the concepts and importance of the sites of memory studies in sustaining the identity of a population.

The thesis is a humble contribution to researches of the relation between the identity and the 'other', one of the most vividly discussed subjects of Human Studies worldwide today. Present thesis contributes to the international researches by studying the specifically Italian application possibilities of the question. We hope that the Italian example presented in the thesis can be inspiring in the Eastern-European context as well, and that it can find its connection to sites of memory researches carried out at the University of Debrecen, and that it will scheme a possible direction of development of sites of memory researches, placing its concept and its research methods not into the national frame, but into the context of a local culture.

We hope that further methodological result of the thesis is to scheme a possible long-term development direction of the school by applying the postcolonial methodology to situations not considered strictly postcolonial, that can provide the readers and researchers with descriptions and knowledge of movements, tensions, interactions in not strictly national contexts. The aim undertaken by the thesis is to participate in turning the Italian national literary canon - fixed in the modernity - more dynamic, more relative by concentrating on the local context instead of the national one.

As the 100th anniversary of the earthquake of Avezzano is approaching, the thesis turns out to be especially actual for the Marsica community by talking about the memory of the earthquake through studying the question of local identity, and, as a consequence, it can have a relevance not only in the academic discourse, but in the Marsican cultural life as well. The aim is not only the self-understanding, so the question is not only self-relevant, but it can help the life of the community by contributing to showing the Marsican identity to the world outside.

Related publications:

1. *Influssi italiani nell'opera di Wladyslw da Gelniov.*
Roczniki Humanistyczne, 1992 t. 35/36 (1987/1988), zeszyt 5, pp.5-15.
2. *Un viaggio particolare*, Tracce, Coop.Editoriale Nuovo mondo , n.9, October 1995, pp. 22-24.
3. *Un nuovo genere letterario nel panorama della letteratura contemporanea abruzzese marsicana: il noir di Gianni Paris*,
in: Disputationes Scientifical Univerzitatit Chatolichae In Ružomberok, , ročník XIII, n.1 r. 2013, Verbum 2013, pp. 126-144.
4. *Boccaccio e l'italiano: recenti acquisizioni sulle novelle*,
in: Italianistica Debrecensis, Debrecen University press, 2014. (accepted for publication).
5. Libertini Rosangela – Marta Mišurova: *Veci, ktoré ešte nikto nevidel: projekt Galileo.*
itt: Disputationes scientificae Universitatit catolicae in Ružomberok. Ružomberok: VERBUM - vydavateľstvo KU, 2014, roč. 14, č. 1, pp. 122-131.
6. *Uomini e Lupi. La figura del lupo nelle descrizioni del terremoto di Avezzano del 1915* In AA.VV. Per non dimenticare. Volume commemorativo in occasione del centenario del terremoto di Avezzano, LCL Avezzano, 2015 (accepted for publication)