Giovanni Dettori

Italian Literature outside the National Literary Canon: The Case of *Bellas Mariposas* by Sergio Atzeni

Abstract: Italian literature has been constructed monolithically around an artificial Italian standard. The extraordinary example represented by the works of Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch paved the way for writers who came after them and who could not avoid resorting to the language elaborated by these exemplary authors. Italian, as a modern language, finds its roots in the Tuscan dialect forged into a literary language by the Three Crowns of Italian literature. Italian unification in 1861 highlighted the lack of national unity of the Italian people: the state was created, but the people did not identify with the newly unified state. The construction of the fragile Italian identity relied also on the idea of a national literature. Scholars highlighted the unifying elements of such a literature, minimizing its geographical, cultural, and linguistic diversity. In the twentieth century, the Italian literary canon opened itself to works that reflect the cultural and linguistic fragmentation of Italy. Carlo Emilio Gadda and Pier Paolo Pasolini, among others, dignified a literature based on code-mixing and linguistic pastiche. This article describes the multilingualism of Sardinian literature with reference to a tale by Sergio Atzeni, one of the precursors of the so-called Sardinian *nouvelle vague*.

Keywords: *Bellas Mariposas*, contemporary Italian writers, Italian polycentrism, multicultural diversity, multilingual literature, problems of identity, regional Italian, regional literatures, Sardinian language, Sardinian literature, Sergio Atzeni

Italian literature has always been characterized by multilingualism. The fragile Italian national identity is reflected in the multiplicity of languages and dialects spoken on the peninsula. However, the history of Italian literature has been interpreted monolithically as the history of texts written in Italian. From De Sanctis on, we find a progressive centralization of Italian literature, favoured also by nationalistic Fascist rhetoric. This monolithic conception of a literature constituted solely by texts written in standard Italian continues to dominate literature programmes in the Italian educational system (Sulis 2004, 81).

The idea of a national literature written in Italian is rather misleading. In fact, for centuries, literary production in Italian was at least bilingual – Italian and Latin – and also included works in other languages and dialects. It is sufficient to cite *Il Milione* by Marco Polo (1254–1324), a thirteenth-century travelogue

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originally transcribed in Franco-Venetian, or *Lo cunto de li cunti* (1634–1636) by Gianbattista Basile (1566–1632), written in the Neapolitan dialect. Production in languages other than Italian continued during the twentieth century as well, and found one of its most illustrious proponents in the figure of Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975), who wrote one of his first works, the poetry collection *Poesie a Casarsa* (1942), in his native Friulian language.

During the twentieth century, the monolithic conception of the national canon has been deposed by authors who experiment with the Italian language; they have progressively contaminated Italian with dialects in order to reflect the reality of the spoken language heard on the Italian peninsula and to affirm a specific local identity that goes beyond the national identity.

1 The Sardinian *nouvelle vague*

Contemporary Sardinian literature represents an example of a literary corpus that moves away from the rigidity of the Italian national canon; it rejects monolingualism in favour of a hybrid style that mixes languages and registers. In recent decades, the Italian island of Sardinia, the second-largest island in the Mediterranean after Sicily, has experimented and produced a cultural renaissance that has brought many Sardinian authors onto the national and international literary stage. The artistic vitality on the island has been defined by the critic Goffredo Fofi as a "nouvelle vague" (2003), and by the journalist, writer, and critic Giacomo Mameli as a "Sardinian literary spring" (2008). Alfredo Franchini, writing about the "nouvelle vague mediterranea" [Mediterranean *nouvelle vague*], remarks on the surprising number of publications coming from Sardinia: "Gli artisti sardi stanno vivendo un momento particolarmente felice, che per quanto riguarda l'editoria, s'è tradotto nella pubblicazione da parte delle 45 case editrici regionali di circa 250 titoli in un anno" [Sardinian artists are experiencing a particularly favourable moment that, where the publishing industry is concerned, resulted in the publication of 250 titles per year by 45 regional publishers] (quoted in Amendola 2006, 112).[1]

Despite the popularity of the term "Sardinian *nouvelle vague*," this labelling is rather misleading because it seems to suggest a renaissance of Sardinian literature emerging after a dark period in which literary production was absent. This idea is wrong, for Sardinia has a long literary tradition that spans centuries. Franchini explains the success of Sardinian authors like Salvatore Niffoi (1950–), Salva-

1 All translations in this article are my own.

tore Mannuzzu (1930–2019), Marcello Fois (1960–), Giorgio Todde (1951–2020), and Flavio Soriga (1975–), who publish for national publishers, with a change in readers' attitudes toward regional languages and dialects. He remarks that Sardinian people, due to their distinctive history, are accustomed to using several languages and dialects. Furthermore, a more accepting attitude on the part of the general Italian audience toward languages other than Italian has favoured the affirmation of a Sardinian literature outside the island. In fact, what characterizes works written by Sardinian authors in Italian is a mix of Italian and Sardinian. This linguistic mix can be minimal, as in the works of Salvatore Mannuzzu, or more predominant, as in those of Niffoi or Fois. This unconventional use of Italian manipulates the standard to create a hybrid language.

2 Sardinian literature

Sardinian literature has always been characterized as profoundly linked to a Sardinian identity, often stereotypically connoted. Sardinia used to be perceived as an island outside history and time. Immovable, unchangeable, and archaic. This is what made and still makes Sardinia fascinating in the eyes of non-Sardinians. The island is seen as an exotic place, inhabited by fierce and brave populations animated by extreme passions that can lead to vindictive and destructive actions. Grazia Deledda, the only Italian female writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, in 1926, contributed to this rather stereotypical idea of Sardinia. Maurizio Virdis observes that the island had to be distinguished from the Italian mainland. Its peculiar identity had to be clearly marked in contraposition to Italy and the rest of the world. Life on the island had to be sketched in strong colours so that its distinctiveness could emerge as much as possible (Virdis, quoted in Contarini, Marras, and Pias 2012, 31).

The interior of the island, the setting of Deledda's novels, became the paradigm of a true Sardinia. According to this narrative, people inhabiting this region were less contaminated by outside invaders and spoke the most genuine form of Sardinian. The myth of an authentic Sardinia is reinforced with the urbanization processes that put the rural and urban areas of the island into contact with each other. From every part of the island, people flowed to the main Sardinian cities like Cagliari and Sassari. The main language of communication in urban agglomerations became Italian, and the Sardinian language started to lose ground. The so called "Piani di Rinascita" [Rebirth Plans] implemented during the sixties, imposed by the Italian government on Sardinia, forced the creation of industrial areas on the island and brought an imposed, violent modernization to the region.

This process was aimed at improving the Sardinian economy but was not successful; it polluted large areas of Sardinia and contributed to the weakening of the Sardinian identity and language without producing long-lasting significant economic growth. During the seventies, the defence of Sardinian identity and language became a central theme for those political groups that defended the right to self-determination of the Sardinian people. The debate about identity has linguistic and literary aspects, as well as assuming political significance.

3 A new course for Sardinian literature

Contemporary literary production on the island is focused on discourses of identity. Sardinian authors reflect on the idea of *sardità*, of what it means to be Sardinian, and on the role of the Sardinian language. They project a less monolithic image of the island, one that is multiform and composite. Sardinia is not just the archaic, rural, mythical place symbolized by the mountainous central villages of the island, keepers of the true Sardinian essence. The contrast between a real rural Sardinia and an altered urbanized Sardinia ceases to exist. Sardinian identity is expressed in rural villages as well as in urban contexts.

The author that contributed most to a revival of Sardinian literature was Sergio Atzeni (1952–1995). He is considered one of the most important Sardinian authors of the second half of the twentieth century, and his works continue to influence literary production on the island. Like many other Sardinian writers, Atzeni is profoundly influenced by the history, culture, and language of Sardinia. His works revolve around a reformulation of Sardinian identity through a reexamination of Sardinian history that assumes a mythopoeic connotation. This tendency is particularly evident in his posthumous novel *Passavamo sulla Terra Leggeri* [Lightly We Passed on Earth] (1996), where the author fictionalizes Sardinian history and fictitiously recreates the language of ancient Sardinian populations. His aim is that of providing a Sardinian mythology in which Sardinians can anchor their peculiar, distinct identity.

One of the most characteristic features of Atzeni's style is the unique use he makes of linguistic contamination. This tendency can already be observed in his debut novel, *Apologo del giudice bandito* [Apologue of the Bandit Judge] (1986), in which he inserts names and place names derived from the Sardinian language. These insertions give his narrative a sense of linguistic otherness that will continue throughout his production. Atzeni's language becomes progressively more contaminated by different languages, registers, and codes. He grafts Sardinian

syntax and vocabulary onto the Italian language, creating a hybrid, a composite puzzle of linguistic systems.

Atzeni is not the first Sardinian author to mix Italian and Sardinian in his writing. Code-mixing between the two languages can also be observed in Deledda's novels. However, Atzeni perfected this art, especially after the encounter he had with Patrick Chamoiseau (1953–) in 1993 and the translation he made of Chamoiseau's novel *Texaco*. Meeting with the Martiniquais writer and translating his work exerted a strong influence on the Sardinian author. The creolized French used by Chamoiseau inspired Atzeni to experiment with a similar form of creolization that mixed Italian with the Sardinian language (Sulis 2002, 557).

4 *Bellas Mariposas*: A text between languages

The most accomplished result of Atzeni's linguistic experimentation is the story *Bellas Mariposas* [Beautiful Butterflies], published in 1996. This tale is a monologue presented by the protagonist Caterina (Cate), a young girl who lives in a dysfunctional family with an unemployed slacker father, a mother who is relegated to the role of housewife, and several other siblings: one older sister, Mandarina, who has two young children and who works as a prostitute to support herself and her daughters; Tonio, a violent guy; and Massimo, a drug addict; Alex, who plays in a band; Ricciotti, a promising soccer player; and Luisella, who is only one-and-a-half years old. In this tale, we follow the young protagonist and her best friend Luna through an entire day: 3 August of an undefined year. Cate will tell us, with a humoristic and at times poetic style, the stories of the neighbours in her degraded suburb of Cagliari, the capital city of Sardinia, and her adolescent dream of redemption from the misery and degradation of her family and surroundings.

In this work, the author perfects the mixing of Italian, Sardinian, and other languages, like English and Spanish, in a seemingly perfect fusion of linguistic codes. The title itself is an example of code-switching. It can be read in Spanish or Sardinian; in fact, the words *bellas* "beautiful" and *mariposas* "butterflies" are the same in the two languages. The title is a testimony to the linguistic influence of the Spanish language on the island due to Aragonese-Spanish rule, which lasted from the thirteenth century to the beginning of the eighteenth century, when the island passed into the hands of the House of Savoy (Broccia 2014, 8). In *Bellas Mariposas*, Atzeni intertwines Sardinian and Italian in such a way that it is almost impossible to separate the two languages. In the same sentence, we find words, expressions, and syntactic forms in both languages in a continuous game of code-

switching. This linguistic phenomenon is defined as the "alternation of two languages within a single discourse, sentence or constituent" (Poplack 1978, 583). At times, entire sequences in Sardinian accompany Italian sentences. The author does not provide any translation or any explanatory footnotes for the Sardinian parts. For a reader who is not familiar with the Sardinian language, many passages can be incomprehensible. Atzeni embraces the idea of an opaque language, a concept formulated by Chamoiseau. In fact, the texts of the Martiniquais author present the same comprehension difficulties for readers who are not familiar with the creole spoken in Martinique. Both authors leave the interpretation of obscure passages to the audience. Their language is opaque; it is the product of the encounter between different cultures and linguistic systems (Sulis 2002, 563). Furthermore, Atzeni almost expects that the word will reveal its content on its own. He is not particularly concerned if the reader does not understand its meaning; he is more interested in the musical effect the "foreign" word produces in the text, as if that word is a musical note contributing to the rhythm of the text (Marci 1999, 57).

Sergio Atzeni, like many Sardinian authors, finds his inspiration in the island, to which he feels a deep attachment. In an interview, Atzeni stated: "Non riesco ad immaginare storie che non siano ambientate qui. Mi sento sardo e come tale mi presento dovunque vado" [I cannot imagine stories that are not set in Sardinia. I feel Sardinian and as such I introduce myself, wherever I go] (quoted in Marci 1999, 235). He also admires the Sardinian language, which he defines as "bellissima" [very beautiful] (35); he is saddened by the progressive loss of this language: "mi dispiace che si perda perché è idioma straordinariamente ricco" [I'm sorry about the loss of this language, since it is an extraordinarily rich one] (35). Atzeni appreciates the mixing of and contamination between languages, which he sees as an enrichment for the Italian language as well: "L'unico modo in cui posso arricchire la lingua italiana dal punto di vista dei vocaboli è recuperandoli dalla esperienza sarda" [The only way in which I can enrich the vocabulary of Italian is drawing words from Sardinian] (35–36).

5 The Sardinian language

The Sardinian language itself is the fruit of language mixing and contamination. Sardinian presents a particularly dense pre-Roman substratum in which Paleo-Sardinian elements are accompanied by Punic and Iberian elements that indicate some similarities with the Basque language. All these different linguistic stratifications reflect the complexity of Sardinian history, which is marked by a series of

conquests by different civilizations: Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, Pisans, Genoese, Catalans, Aragonese, and Piedmontese. With each conquest, the island found a different language that was absorbed into the ancient pre-Indo-European language that formed the substratum of Sardinian (Marci 2010, 17–64).

With the Roman conquest of Sardinia in 238 BC, all the island's indigenous languages were absorbed into Latin and developed into the Sardinian vernacular. The formation of the Sardinian vernacular reflects a similar pattern shared by other Romance languages like Portuguese, Spanish, Catalan, and French. Sardinian was one of the first Romance languages in Europe to be used in public administration; the first documents in Sardinian date to the eleventh century and appear in all four autonomous state entities, called *giudicati*, into which the island was divided. The surviving documents are mainly juridical transactions; this seemed to be the prevalent area of utilization for the language, and throughout the fourteenth century we do not find examples of literary texts written in Sardinian. In 1323, Sardinia fell under Aragonese control; Catalan started to exert its profound influence throughout the island and it became the official language for public administration until 1643. Catalan continued to be used on the island even after the reunification of the Crowns of Castile and Aragon in 1469. After Latin, Catalan and Spanish are the languages that most influenced and shaped Sardinian vocabulary and syntax (Casula 2013, 13–14).

Atzeni transposes the various stratifications of the Sardinian language into the language of the tale. The text is the product of multilingualism and multiculturalism that permeate the narrative from beginning to end. In fact, the protagonists of the tale, predominantly Cate, express their thoughts by alternating between at least three different linguistic codes: Italian, Sardinian, and a non-standard dialectal form of Italian spoken in Cagliari that is highly influenced by the language of the island and defined by scholars as the "Italian of Sardinia." This language consists primarily of a mix of Italian and Sardinian words and syntactic structures that are superimposed on Italian syntax. A similar phenomenon is observable all over Italy, where the influence of dialects is still felt and penetrates standard Italian (de Renzo 2008, 59).

6 Code-switching

In *Bellas Mariposas*, Sardinian sneaks into Italian in different ways throughout the narrative of the young Cate. In this short work of only about thirty pages, 178 sentences contain Sardinian words or expressions enclosed in Italian phrases. The fre-

quency with which the linguistic mixture occurs results in an almost perfect blending of the two languages, producing a unique language used by the protagonist Cate. She expresses her thoughts in a style that is dominated by a continuous alternation between Italian and Sardinian words or sentences. The author uses several varieties of code-switching. The simplest way in which Sardinian contaminates the narrative is achieved through the insertion of Sardinian words into Italian sentences. This type of code-switching is called tag switch by Poplack; tag switches do not considerably affect the structure and the comprehension of a sentence. Poplack states that tags are heavily loaded with ethnic content and are low on the translation scale (1979, 589). Tag switches are less linked to the grammatical structure of a sentence; they can be moved around inside a sentence and they can occupy different positions in it.

Tag switches as described by Poplack occur mainly with nouns; other grammatical categories, like adjectives or articles followed by nouns, need to be carefully inserted into the Italian phrase, and they participate in its grammatical structure. According to Poplack's statement, most of the tag switches involving a single noun presented in the text are linked to slang words in the regional variety of Italian spoken in Cagliari, where the story is set, rather than to the Sardinian language. Here some examples, highlighted in italics:

– "lo presenta quella *caghina* famosa Battistina Puresciori" [it (the show) is hosted by that famous affected woman Battistina Puresciori] (Atzeni 1996, 74);
– "in pullman c'era un *grezzo*" [on the bus there was a vulgar man] (87); and
– "guardando la *stria* non si è accorto […]" [looking at the bitch, he didn't realize (…)] (87).

These words, although influenced by the Sardinian language, reflect the regional variety of Italian spoken on the island.

Another way in which Atzeni manipulates Italian is through the use of extrasentential code-switching – a form of code-switching that occurs outside the rigid structure of a sentence and does not fall into a specific grammatical category. Examples of this kind of code-switching are fillers, interjections, and idiomatic expressions. In the text, we find several interjections that are taken from the Sardinian language or the regional variety of Italian spoken in Cagliari. Examples of interjections are *pezzemerda*, an insult which Cate repeatedly directs at her father or men in general, who are seen as vile human beings – "non come quel pezzemmerda di babbo" [not like that piece of shit of my dad] (Atzeni 1996, 77) – and the interjection "mindaffuttu" [I don't give a damn] (99).

At times, code-switching expands into entire segments in Sardinian, often introduced by Italian sentences. Rarer is the case of a Sardinian sentence preceding an Italian one. Here are some examples, again highlighted in italics:

– "gli ha detto *Immoi arruis e ti segasa sa skina*" [he told him, Now you fall and you will break your back] (Atzeni 1996, 87); and
– "pareva mio fratello Tonio *mera prus becciu e leggiu*" [he looked like my brother Tonio way older and uglier] (93).

An example of a Sardinian sentence preceding an Italian one:

– "*no sciri kistionai mancu su casteddaiu* altro che spagnolo" [he doesn't know how to speak the dialect from Cagliari, let alone Spanish] (Atzeni 1996, 70).

This type of code-switching, in which a sentence in a specific language, in this case Italian, is completed by a sentence in a different language, here Sardinian, was defined by Poplack (1978) as intra-sentential code-switching. This is a more complex or "intimate" type of code-switching, in which two segments written in two different languages are blended together while respecting the syntactic rules of the two languages so that the grammatical bridging of the two codes is made possible. The effect is that of completing the concept expressed in Italian, of amplifying it, of giving more character to the sentence, of resolving it in a pun, and expressing belonging to a group through the use of a regional linguistic code.

Very rarely, we find more than one phrase written in Sardinian; when longer sentences in Sardinian are present, they are usually uttered by Cate's parents, his father and mother, or by older protagonists. The longest sentence completely in Sardinian in the short story is attributed to Cate's father. Its content is rather obscene and vulgar; it is an exhortation to a female stripper who is performing on television to get naked and show her intimate parts: "E bogarindi cussas murandas aiò caladdas brava brava de aicci aiò brava oberi oberi su pillittu faimmmiddu biri aiò oberi bagassa de aicci brava brava faimmì biri su stampu e su culu" [Come on, take off those panties, come on, lower them, good girl, like that, come on, open it, let me see your pussy, come on open, you slut, like that, good girl, let me see your butthole] (Atzeni 1996, 75).

It is not surprising that Cate's father uses Sardinian as his main language. It reflects a common pattern in regions where minority languages or dialects are spoken in a situation of diglossia. After the unification of Italy in 1861, the Sardinian language slowly underwent a diglossic process that reached its peak in recent decades. Sardinian became the language of lower prestige, was relegated to a domestic environment, and stopped being transmitted to younger generations. Atzeni's short tale mirrors the linguistic situation on the island, where younger generations speak an Italian interspersed with Sardinian words and expressions,

attesting a growing practice of code-switching (Rindler Schjerve 1993, 2003). The local language of the island saw a reduction in its users, who perceived it as a symbol of the past and an obstacle to economic development and social mobility. In particular, women, who are the main transmitter of languages due to the important function they exert in the upbringing of children, are especially reluctant to use Sardinian when communicating with their children, and they opt for an education based on Italian (Tufi 2013, 154). In fact, many sociolinguistic studies have shown that women favour the most prestigious variety of language, fearing that the use of a minority language could produce social exclusion and economic disadvantages (Gal 1978; Labov 1990; Cavanaugh 2006).

Diglossia can explain why the use of Sardinian by the younger protagonists of Atzeni's tale is so fragmentary and heavily characterized by code-switching. Furthermore, it is debatable if the characters in the short story are really speaking Sardinian; it can be argued instead that they are using Sardinian to give Italian more directness and a local colouring. It is also remarkable that Sardinian is relegated to the semantic area of swear words and profanities that produce a comic effect on the reader. Some examples include "minca" [cock] (Atzeni 1996, 63), "bagassa" [whore] (66), "calloni" [asshole] (67), "cagalloni" [asshole] (67), "folaga" [masturbation] (75), "coddare" [to fuck] (79), and "babassoni" [dumbass] (83).

Atzeni constructs a very peculiar language which draws from Sardinian but also from the Italian spoken in Cagliari, which he defines as the "Calaritana" language (quoted in Marci 1999, 57). Atzeni, even when he is using Italian, enriches it with structures and idiomatic expressions that are typical of the Italian spoken in Cagliari and that reflect the syntactic structure of Sardinian. The author is fascinated by the mixing that characterizes the language spoken in the capital city of Sardinia: "Vivere a Cagliari è un'esperienza esaltante, per chi ama la confusione linguistica, la mescolanza spuria degli idiomi, i giochi di parole deliranti: spesso – in modo più o meno cosciente – si parla un italiano contraffatto, incomprensibile a chi non sia del luogo, tratto di peso dal sardo" [Living in Cagliari is an exalting experience for those who like linguistic confusion, the illegitimate mixing of languages, the delirious play on words: often – with more or less awareness – people speak a fake Italian, unintelligible to people that are not from there, heavily influenced by the Sardinian language] (Atzeni, quoted in Marci 1999, 220). The Sardinian language used in *Bellas Mariposas* reflects the diglossic situation that characterizes the island. Italian and Sardinian coexist in an unequal relationship. Sardinian is relegated to the expression of popular sentiments, it is confined to the run-down neighbourhood where Cate lives, and it is the language of poverty and degradation, used for comic effects, to express vulgar images, and to swear. To standard Italian, not contaminated by any code-switching, is assigned the role of describing elevated

and poetic feelings, like the sensation of freedom Cate feels when she swims in the beautiful Sardinian sea.

The mixing of languages and codes is so dominant throughout the text that it is difficult to assert that this is a tale written in Italian; but, at the same time, it is not a work written entirely in Sardinian either. It is a perfect blending of codes that effectively depicts a linguistic reality on the island where Sardinian is used on private occasions and survives in smaller communities. Atzeni foresaw what could be the future of the Sardinian language, endangered and at risk of dying, overwhelmed by the power of Italian and its prestige. Furthermore, the author accurately portrayed the use of Italian among more disadvantaged social groups on Sardinia – an Italian that is no longer standard but a hybrid product with strong traces of Sardinian syntax, words, and expressions.

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Giovanni Dettori is a lecturer of Italian at SUNY Cortland, NY. His research explores investigates the works of multilingual and multicultural Italian writers. He also explores problems of identity in minority groups with a special focus on Sardinia. He is also interested in the preservation and maintenance of minority languages, focusing his interest on the Sardinian and Corsican languages.