

## Saskia Elizabeth Ziolkowski. Kafka's Italian Progeny

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non si escludano fra loro, ma anzi come le narrazioni più potenti siano quelle in cui diversi modelli coesistono e si scontrano (come in *Maria Zefi*).

Se è vero che, come scrive Franco Moretti, “forms are the abstract of social relationships” allora “formal analysis is in its own modest way an analysis of power” ( “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review*, 2000). Parisi non è un critico marxista ma tuttavia crede nella funzione sociale della letteratura. “La letteratura italiana” osserva “ha contribuito alla creazione delle storie che ci raccontiamo per capire le diverse, complicate, dolorose vicende che vanno sotto il nome di abuso sessuale dei minori” e in generale ha svolto un ruolo chiave nella sfera pubblica di “un paese diviso e spesso in crisi come il nostro” (30–31). Non deve sorprendere allora, che un libro rigorosamente concentrato su aspetti tematici e formali si concluda con un appello morale e politico nel senso più alto del termine: secondo Parisi, le storie di abusi documentano “i meccanismi perversi della sfera pubblica in cui gli italiani dibattono i loro problemi” (338), la cui “faziosità” offre schermo a violenze e disuguaglianze, e impediscono quello che Leopardi definiva “l’onesto e il retto conversar cittadino,” e che è un requisito indispensabile della democrazia.

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**Saskia Elizabeth Ziolkowski. *Kafka’s Italian Progeny*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. Pp. 316. ISBN 9781487506308.**

When we think of the word *progeny*, our minds usually go to an offspring descending directly from its genitors, where the origin of such descendants is clear and unquestionable. It is exactly the problematic clarity of this process of progeny that Saskia Ziolkowski is valuably calling into question in *Kafka’s Italian Progeny* by adopting Franz Kafka’s *oeuvre* as the counterpoint to problematize the idea of a national literature, namely Italian literature.

Applying Jorge Luis Borges’s discussion of Kafka’s precursors to his descendants instead, Ziolkowski originally surveys Italian contemporary literature from 1940 in the light of Kafka’s direct or referred influence. Accordingly, the chapters survey a variety of Italian authors, from those more traditionally associated with Kafka such as Italo Svevo, Italo Calvino, Elsa Morante, Massimo Bontempelli,

Antonio Tabucchi, Dino Buzzati, Cesare Pavese, and Tommaso Landolfi, to those less commonly related such as Lalla Romano, Giorgio Manganelli, Paola Capriolo, and Elena Ferrante. At the centre of these chapters is less the relation that these authors entertained with Kafka than the reconfiguration of the panorama of Italian contemporary literature obtained through this comparison. For this reason, each chapter also focuses on a different specific theme. In so doing, the author, while reconsidering and contributing to shedding light on new aspects that Kafka and Italian authors have in common, delineates an alternative map of contemporary Italian writers considered in discussions around—in order of chapters—realism and modernism, short fiction, detective fiction, the portrayal of familial relation, and animal studies.

The first chapter indulges in the interesting argument according to which the Italian reception of Kafka as a realist author depends, at least up until Calvino and Edoardo Sanguineti, on the great influence Georg Lukács played in the history of Italian literary criticism. The rest of the chapter focuses on the comparative analyses of Kafka's works alongside Italo Calvino's and Cesare Pavese's to illuminate how the ambiguity of their texts make it possible to read these authors as modernist or realist. Basing the comparison of Kafka and Calvino and Pavese on their "limited hope of finding community," though, may appear more to confirm the Lukacsian hermeneutic tradition than underline "the ambiguities of both works" (66).

Chapter 2 compares Kafka's short fiction with short texts written by Romano, Manganelli, and Tabucchi to undermine the reading of twentieth-century literature "in terms of the poetry-novel dichotomy" (66). While the consideration of these three authors alongside Kafka is new, the evidence of the aforementioned quotation may need more contextualization and justification. Chapter 3 originally shows how the openness of Kafka's plots, often read and interpreted as detective stories, calls into question the traditional structure of detective fiction and paves the way for new forms exemplified in Italian literature by Umberto Eco, Carlo Emilio Gadda, Leonardo Sciascia, Antonio Tabucchi, and Andrea Camilleri.

Chapter 4 draws stimulating comparisons between the depictions of the familial institution in the works of Kafka along with Svevo, Ferrante, Bontempelli, and Morante. At times, the confusion between fictional and biographical levels risks weakening the interesting similarities individuated in the portrayal of the family. The recollection of Kafka's life is important to understand its reflection in his work, but it is at times hazardous comparing fictional characters—from

Ferrante's novels, or later in the chapter, Morante's—with aspects of Kafka's historical biography (188, 202). Chapter 5 examines the human-animal boundary in Kafka alongside Svevo, Morante, and Landolfi. In particular, the chapter focuses not only on the representation of the animal and the difficult communication humans and animals may entertain but also, and more importantly, on what this relation with the non-human says about the human itself.

The author impressively and magisterially handles the bibliography that such a variety of authors and organization entails. The downside and the upside of such richness in figures and themes is that, while at times the academic reader is left with the feeling that there is more to say about the examinations of specific themes and authors, these analyses spark the reader's interest to learn more and to continue thinking about it. Ziolkowski succeeds in condensing in three hundred pages such an extensive topic, which would also fit the space an anthology or a book series could grant it.

As the title already suggests, *Kafka's Italian Progeny* speaks to an academic audience focusing on contemporary Italian literature as well as comparative literature. On the one hand, the goal of the book is to rethink national literature through an international perspective, while, on the other hand, the volume presents itself as a concrete experiment of comparative literature and comparative thinking that shows how the latter is useful to open new avenues of thought about national literatures. The comparative literature argument would become a stronger presence in the volume if more space could be dedicated to explaining why the book focuses on some aspects of Kafka over others and the contextual reasons for which every author mentioned can be considered alongside Kafka. Ultimately, *Kafka's Italian Progeny* is an exemplary work that shows the importance of questioning the foundation and criteria on which a national literature is based and how the comparison with an author who does not belong, in the traditional sense, to the literature of a specific nation, is a productive means towards achieving this goal.

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