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« **De pizza habe disappeared !** » : Italy, Europe, Europanto

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Gut espera! Wat passe? Excusazio, no no, it's not an audio problem with my microphone. I am just showing off my command of Europanto. Eh ? Wat signifie? No, no esse so facile, but I'll try to tame it for you by proposing a detour through a movie by Roberto Benigni. Some of you may remember *Down By Law*, actually spelt *Daunbailò*, and in particular an exhilarating scene where Benigni triumphantly exclaims «I have **caught** the rabbit! My mother Isolina **teached** me how to cook **him** with the **rosmarino**, olive oil, garlic and other secrets of **the Isolina**.» And he goes on recalling, in a dream, a conversation with his mother, «the Isolina»: « Robertino vieni qua, Robertino come on » « No I don't want,» « Come on, and **tac, una botta** in my neck ». « I am not a rabbit » « Yes you are »...¹

Well, if you enjoy Benigni's free-range English, I think you are also ready for Europanto. And, to be sure, before you feel too much the burden of waiting, as heavy as Benigni's « botta in the neck », with the inevitable ... pain in the neck it entails, let me cut this preamble and satisfy your curiosity right away by telling you that Europanto is a language created, as a provocation, by Diego Marani, a contemporary Italian novelist, essayist, translator, and policy officer in the Multilingualism Policy Unit of the European Commission in Brussels, whose chief claim to fame is precisely the attempt to foster easier communication within Europe by eroding the current domination of the English language within the E.U. and, along with it, by questioning the primacy of any linguistic and cultural nationalism. Marani is the author of many novels, most of them written in the lingua del sì— from *Nuova grammatica finlandese* (2000) which won the Grinzane Cavour award, to *L'ultimo dei Vostiachi* (2002) and *L'interprete* (2004) among others--

but also of a vast array of extremely witty and entertaining sketches in Europanto, originally published in the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir Illustré* and the Swiss *Le Temps*, widely featured on Italian and international media, and in some cases transformed into chapters of an amusing crime fiction, *Las Aventuras des Inspector Cabillot*, the first novel written entirely in Europanto and published in 1999. More episodes are forthcoming.

Engaging with translation both in its primary function of linguistic transfer and in its metaphorical sense of a wider politics of carrying across, Marani investigates the possibility of a European consciousness able to reopen the question of identity and cultural diversity upon other premises with respect to the ideological legacy of the Old Continent: from Europe as a monolithic, self-centered locus and idea exported and imposed on the “other” to a complex cultural space in which displacement and difference can move Europe away from its own singularity. As I hope to show, with Europanto Marani can be said to push one step further the so-called provincialization of Europe that cultural critic Dipesh Chakrabarty presents as a way of renovating the European heritage “from and for the margins”² of the world, margins which, however, are to be considered in their plurality and diversity, just as different centers, different Europes, materialize from within different colonial geographies. For Chakrabarty, the categories drawn from European thought cannot be simply rejected tout court. They are now considered “both indispensable and inadequate” (*Provincializing* 19) in representing non-European practices and perspectives. Therefore, the European approach has to be diluted in “other normative and theoretical thought” (20) deriving from “other existing life practices and their archives” (20), so as to create “plural normative horizons” (20) specific to particular existences, situations and possibilities.

For his part, Marani provincializes Europe but from within, by an act of self-creolization. Through a language of his own creation, which embodies a Europeanness in progress, Marani proposes a model of subjectivity in transit within and across the boundaries of Europe that operates in a scenario of linguistic and cultural cross-fertilization conveying the need to build a Europe in which the abstract European identity constructed from above by a socio-political organization like the European Union can work in unison with the individuals' own sense of belonging to a larger and more complex entity, and with their ability to identify with its politics of mobility and multilingualism without disavowing the cultural legacy of their nation-ness altogether.

The comic hyperboles that Marani conjures up in his Europantic vignettes are based upon a textual performance in which form and content work together to address major issues about the construction process of a culturally plural Europe. From the point of view of form, Marani does not simply build sentences as combinations of self-contained words belonging to different national languages and still respecting their individual syntactical and grammatical rules. Rather, he hybridizes words themselves with a blend of translation and invented calques (i.e. loan translations), and fabricates structures that do not correspond exactly to those of any specific national idiom even when he seems to borrow the most effective and accessible portions of them. At the same time, the content problematizes both the ideology of nationness and that of Europeanness by addressing, with irony, major timely topics related to identitarian and cultural idiosyncrasies of individual nations and to equally stereotypical aspects of the European institutional project. For instance, as in “Que viva la Mamma”³, in the framework of gastronomy which also works as metaphor for broader ideological standpoints, the problematic vision of Europe-building as an anarchic *mélange* that erases individual and national traits (in this case

symbolized by the fusion and confusion of ingredients that contaminate the authenticity and orthodoxy of recipes) clashes with the rigor of Italian aesthetic standards, here embodied and implemented by the classic, unavoidable “mamma” sent by « De italiane Accademia por Gutte Cucina » “partodo in der mundo donde esse italiane restaurantes» to «taste der sauce (...) check quantos viel eggs esse in der pasta, quanto savourose esse der soffritto, quanto consistente esse der sauce tomate, quanto al dente esse die spaghettos». According to the logic of Europanto, Marani observes, both with languages and with cooking, «es coudde opportune wel sympatische esse de mixe und neue flavours create» but «man must mix wat mixable esse. Alles mixturas esse savourose solo if respecte der harmonia des ingredientes». Therefore «quando somecosa uncorrecte appear» in a recipe, la mamma punishes transgressive cooks, and restores «der gastronomische dogma in alle seine purity».

Another text, “In pizza wir trust”⁴, ridicules what are perceived as the EU’s absurd and erratic impositions upon nations’ established practices and typical products, and foresees, with equal irony, the classical cunning Italian reaction to such supranational interference. “Eine inopportune europese directive » has forbidden woodfire pizza because it allegedly poses a threat to consumers’ health, yet we continue to eat dangerously contaminated food with the EU’s blessing. Therefore, « Italianos begin de unterstande que maybe Europe esse nicht der Paradise que ellos imagined, donde alles esse perfect ». However, in this European Union « à la carte », where each state seems to find ways of circumventing Brussels’s irrational mandates, the hope is, paradoxically, that this capricious action against woodfire pizza will be implemented, so that Italy can exert the unrivalled art that best connotes its identity, namely, that of infringing prohibitions: “Pizza shal become eine prohibitive merchandise que tu shal habe der opportuntate de taste only in secretas degustationes, als heroine oder ecstasy.

Eine gigantische pizza racket shal desvelop partodo in Europa und, als in der tempo van Medicis, die intrigante wel corruptive genius van italianos shal flourish und secretamente dominate toda die europese unione ».

From mere jokes initially circulating only at Marani's workplace, texts in Europanto have now received international attention as powerful and provocative tools for the promotion of an idea of Europeanness according to which national idioms (as carriers of specific identities) merge into a network of relationships with no strict standards or rules. Further elaborating on the anti-authoritarian principles underlying Europanto, Marani goes as far as to claim that Europanto is not even "a language, nor is it intended to become one"⁵. Rather, it is "a linguistic code of contact, a series of guidelines or 'precautions' to be taken" (1) when we wish to communicate without either depending on a specific lingua franca or getting to the opposite extreme, that of a universal artificial language like, for instance, Esperanto (to which of course the term "Europanto" parodically alludes). Marani's discussion of the premises of a universal, neutral international language allows us to grasp the different linguistic and socio-political agenda of Europanto. The "search for a common basis" and for "simple, logical grammatical rules" (2) based upon codified past practices turned Esperanto into an elitist phenomenon, as we can also gather from an amusing BBC interview in which Marani's progressive defense of Europanto clashes with the resentful and conservative attitude of the Chairman of Wales's Esperanto chapter.⁶ For its part, Europanto starts from the recognition that at present English is already acting like a sort of universal language and that it is hence necessary to make it implode from within. To "europantize" Europe hence means to extend, creatively, the ownership of a totalizing linguistic heritage to a wider and more diverse pool of subjects, that is, to act upon English in such a way as to grant speakers the freedom to internationalize and contaminate it with words of

their choice, borrowed from other languages and transformed at one's own leisure to facilitate communication.

Marani interprets Europeanness precisely as a form of resistance to a levelling globalism insofar as it sets itself against a linguistic universalization that flattens and depersonalizes expressions by replacing the natural connotations of European idioms with a contrived and standardized code. The "Europantization" of English distinguishes itself from the elitist and inflexible quality of an invented Esperanto because it is a productive process in constant evolution, with rules that, unlike abstract and a priori formulations, emerge only as a result of consolidated practices. Its components are molded upon recognizable linguistic forms used in real life contexts and prevail upon other possibilities through the natural consensus deriving from their more extended use among speakers. We can see this in "De europantica eloquentia,"⁷ whose title not accidentally echoes Dante's ambitious linguistic agenda in *De vulgari eloquentia*, the extolment of the dignity of vernacular, the popular language ready to replace the loftier Latin as an expressive and literary medium. In a similar, more provocative way, Marani tells us that languages never die. They transform and multiply themselves into other languages, with their respective cultures, and Europanto intends to synthesize their richness and liveliness: "Om Europanto™ te speakare, tu basta mixare alles wat tu know in extranges linguas. Wat tu know nicht, keine worry, tu invente". And you invent it precisely as an individual performance not based upon systematic study but just stemming from your personal creativity. Marani's creativity has gone so far as to come up with a Europantic version of the French national anthem: « Vamos enfants del Europanto/wir zal Englanto speakare not/ (...) Europantons, Europantons/ eine impura lingua confonde l'anglofon ! »

This sort of purported linguistic democratization encouraging free rearrangements of European idiolects is reinforced by the issue of pronunciation in Europanto. The awareness that, due to the endless combination within this verbal melting pot, original sounds cannot be preserved, leads Marani to simplify the process by inviting speakers to pronounce words as they are spelt. Likewise, discussing the kinds and positions of accent marks in Europanto, Marani gives total freedom to individual users and, as a final joke, even leaves readers a small stock of various accents from which to choose.⁸

Beyond simple mockery, these standpoints suggest what cultural anthropologist James Clifford presents as “strategies for resistance and innovation within and against global determinations”⁹. The agenda behind Europanto articulates the “potential subversion of nationality” that Clifford ascribes to diaspora as a model for cultural hybridity “sustaining connections with more than one place while practicing nonabsolutist forms of citizenship” (9). We could argue that the open pluralism of Europanto is born as a social phenomenon, as a communitarian linguistic and identitarian possibility, even though it cannot be neglected that Marani’s linguistic operation is not totally exempt from an elitist and hierarchical stance. For instance, despite its allegedly liberating agenda, Europanto is fully accessible only to readers with a grasp of several foreign languages, and its composition also tends to privilege the most frequently used European languages to the detriment of less common ones, hence not fully abating barriers within European national traditions. Keeping these caveats in mind, we can nonetheless save the non-hierarchical nature of Europanto when we consider that its use does not depend upon an act of translation as a movement from an original text or word considered as the repository of truth or the embodiment of a norm. Rather, it could be argued that the creativity allowed by Europanto abolishes the normativity of translation tout court. There are no more

standards, only individual renditions of a code that is constantly in the making, with no debt towards previous authoritative sources.

The apparent Babelization accomplished by Europanto does not intend to lead to the chaos of communicative anarchy or to mask a normative linguistic artificiality as alleged naturalness. Rather, it wants to denounce the ideological character of the purity of languages (as absurd as the purity of race, for Marani) and of their connection with ossified nations and identities.¹⁰ If, from a means of conquering democracy, the nation state has become a hindrance to the formation of wider cultural communities, what Europe can do (and what Europanto tries to do) according to Marani is to promote communication against all odds, thanks to mediation and relativization. Linguistic alienation, therefore, becomes a positive, constructive process of self-estrangement aimed at overcoming misunderstanding and diffidence, and not tainted by the disenchantment for an alleged lost sense of locality.

These reflections on linguistic normativity in Marani's "Europantic" philosophy have equally paramount geopolitical implications. They reveal that national sovereignty itself lacks natural foundations and does not reflect the European subject's spontaneous aggregative impulse and sense of belonging. Therefore, it is only by no longer looking at the world through the distorting lens of one's own national state that, Marani claims, the frontier can turn from that sacred and inviolable demarcating line which generated violent wars between states to a symbolic administrative limit that can and should be overcome ("Crimen"). The new European subject epitomized by Marani's Europantic speaker is itself a mobile frontier, and each subject can be said to embody a frontier in a specific and individual way. The frontier, in other words, appears no longer as a static and localizable delimiting line. It is rearticulated as a condition of

continuous movement, as a linguistic and territorial displacement that informs the subject itself, in a shift from *having* borders to *being* a border, to borrow Étienne Balibar's observations.¹¹

In light of this politics of mobility inaugurated by Europanto, any ideological usage of language in favor of nationalism is for Marani a veritable crime ("Crimen"). The future of Europe, he claims, must be intermixing, not the safeguard of localism, and even languages should be allowed to evolve and die instead of being fanatically and artificially kept on life support in isolation. However, this deterritorialization of languages in the configuration of Marani's Europeanness does not endorse absolute drifting but rather reinstates the importance of situatedness. Indeed, just as, at the level of form, the traits of individual European languages survive in Europanto, at the level of content Marani's vignettes keep national clichés recognizable, although they are comically manipulated and inserted in a wider context in which the Europantization of national languages goes hand in hand with the Europeanization of national consciousness. As the piece "Euroarmada"¹² on the creation of a European army shows, despite awareness of the obstacles that hinder that ethics of reciprocal understanding and the attempted elimination of cultural and ideological frontiers, the linguistic performance in Europanto is a concrete assertion of the feasibility of the project of a new European humanism through a constructive Babelization.

In order to obtain worldwide visibility, Marani ironically claims in « Euroarmada », Europe needs an army, but there is a problem with commands: it takes too long to order to shoot in all European languages : " Feuer, Fire, Feu, Fuego, Fuoco, Vuur, Tulta, Fogo, Fyre, Pyros, Fyr! " and not even weapons themselves speak the same language : " Boom, Boem, Bùm, Boum, Bòm ! "Europanto, of course, would offer a practical solution but unfortunately (or fortunately) it has no word for the order to shoot. A way out would be to mime the orders, but, as you can see

in the entire vignette, this is also far from ideal. As well emerges from this context, the linguistic policy of Europanto also constructs a particular European reality that fulfils the wish for specific values of which Europe should be a carrier—in this case, cooperation and non violence.

In Marani's creative production, the expressive unification that Europanto offers is embodied by the protagonist of the various fictional episodes collected in Marani's detective fiction *Las Adventures des Inspector Cabillot*. "Inspector Cabillot est el autentiquo europeano polizero qui fighte contra el mal por eine Europa van pax und prosperity donde se speake eine sola lingua: de Europanto" (*Cabillot* 29). Moving among various European national and cultural contexts, Cabillot makes all those spaces his own through his agency in motion, hence turning national cultural practices into multiple expressions of a unique, albeit composite, reality. The inspector has to solve urgent issues that affect his European scenario and that also connote well-known chapters of various European national histories. Be it money laundering, mad cow – pardon ! « Demente Bovine » -- disease, mafia or toxic waste disposal, each of Cabillot's investigations and solutions is a new piece towards the completion of the European mosaic, insofar as the search for a solution to crimes is also a search for a higher degree of Europeanness, promoted by those communal problems.

And, of course, in *Las Adventures des Inspector Cabillot* there is also the option of attending courses on European political matters with a stage option in different countries. How about a two-day Studievakanzie packet « O Sole mio » « chez der italianse mafia »? Yes, « Sejourne ann (...) main prison in individuale cell, mit TV satellite, mobilo telefono, frigobar, escort muchacha oder muchacho, revolvero cum six cartuccias. Complete pension, todo compriso sauf el anti-projectile gilet » (*Cabillot* 155). The packet includes many amenities, such as a visit to « una droga raffinerij mit degustatio op place. Primero sniffo gratis (...). Für la

heroïna, Du must your propre seringa nemen » (156). Then, after the final sound and light effects of a shoot-out with the local police, you fly back to Brussels with « contrebände zigaretten gratis op board » (157).

Cabillot's linguistic and geographical movement changes the perspective from a national to a European point of view, precisely as Marani advocates in his articles, by breaking the deforming lens of homeland. National life is seen from Brussels, not accidentally selected as “de europeana capitalcity” (*Cabillot* 45), where, symptomatically, the first European policeman resides. Yet Brussels is not portrayed as a sort of originary and privileged site of self-sameness. Rather, it is the spot from where pluralism and multiplicity emerge and spread without a prevailing norm, in line with Cabillot's and Marani's vision of the European condition.

The narrator of Cabillot's adventures here raises the issue of the existence (or lack thereof) of a European consciousness and model of citizenship as the living evidence, from below, of that transnational construction that the European Union has erected from above at the political and administrative level. And he locates in language the *poietic* and *poetic* factor able to promote this new identity. For the moment, the narrator claims, Inspector Cabillot is the only authentic European, who meditates on how much is still needed « ut Europa finalmently unita make » (*Cabillot* 70) and who hence prompts the narrator to adjust to the snags in the European design the more hopeful claim on Italy's nation-building process attributed to D'Azeglio « L'Italia e' fatta. Ora bisogna fare gli Italiani » : « before de make Europa, one shoudde hadde de Europeanos maked » (*Cabillot* 70). But for his part, Cabillot sets Europeanness in motion through the linguistic and territorial dynamics of Europanto, which reconceptualizes identity as a horizontal and relational movement across languages and places, and hence breaks away from the confinement of the nation as a fiction of cultural homogeneity.

Interestingly, the geopolitical and institutional backdrop of Marani's Europantic performances has evolved with time. In more recent vignettes, which Marani included in his volume *Come ho imparato le lingue* [How I learned languages], the Europe of Cabillot has become the « Libera Linguistiche Republica des Europantide »'(140), an island in the midst of the Linguistic Ocean, whose capital is no longer Brussels but, rather, Europantopol. The birth of this free republic, significantly, dates back to the glorious 1848, the year of major European political revolutions for the creation of nation states. In this case, the revolt targeted the tyrannical regime of the « Grammaticale Inquisitione » (141-2). Against its unbearable grammatical rigor, masses of speakers marched in the streets, shouting all possible mistakes in all languages, and ultimately built a gigantic tower of Babel celebrating human mutual understanding, tolerance and creativity.

The triumph of multilingual freedom and diversity in Europantide substantiates Marani's conviction that human reality is too complex to be expressed by only one idiom, and that languages, far from being the property of states or academies, belong to speakers and learners who should treat them like musical instruments, with rules and tonalities to be respected, sure, but not with the obsessive aim of becoming part of an orchestra. There are languages that can be perfectly learned and other ones that each of us speaks more superficially, yet, Marani continues, what matters is to conceive the knowledge of multiple languages as a normal condition of European citizens, and even as their identitarian hallmark.¹³ Not accidentally in Europantopol, speakers of just one, pure, national idiom survive only in a linguistic zoo, in cages with « sein ethnische caractéristique » (*Come ho imparato* 133). For instance, the French are in a miniature Paris and before speaking they always check the dictionary for each word ; the Belgian are two couples, one Flemish and one Walloon, and speak to each other with subtitles ; the

Germans are one couple per Land and speak to one another only in federal hours. But there are some who look at one another without speaking while they are preparing their different wurstel « und sippingante der same bier mit differentes names op der bottle » (134) ; the Italians are one couple plus their respective mammas and many dishes for the best « matrimoniale quarrels » (134). They live « in eine grosse kitchen mit televisive apparat siempre on » (134).

But of course, once we leave the zoo, both in fictional Europantide and in real Europe, authentic mammas, genuine pizzas, and other typical features of the Italian family and social dynamics must increasingly come to terms with alterity, and some of Marani's work in progress -the vignettes in the series "L'Italia spiegata agli stranieri" (Italy explained to foreigners)—targets precisely the Belpaese's difficult encounter with the other within its own homeland. With his unmistakable irony, Marani describes, for instance, the “Andronaute”, that is, a child attending the prestigious ethnic school Andro to be trained in the most selective racism. He will hence learn “comme distingue une rumeno from une romano, une calabrese from une calabrone, (...) une cinese from une ticinese.”¹⁴ Not surprisingly, the Andro school in Marani's witty imagination is the perfect feeder for the Northern Lige University.

Therefore, to conclude, in Marani's Europantic world « [d]e pizza habe disappeared » (*Cabillot* 100) to a certain extent, because the monolithic portrait of Italian-ness (as of any other national identity) based upon typical if not stereotypical elements, emerges as insufficient and fictional, even though, as in the case of words in Europanto, national cultural icons are still recognizable. Europanto envisages a regeneration of the European power of symbolization through linguistic and cultural grafts, presenting border crossing as the writer's existential condition, and suggesting a shift from a *monadic*, self-identical Europe to a *nomadic* Europeanness modeled upon linguistic dislocation and errance. However, Marani also alerts us to

the risk of turning transnational cultural landscapes into homogenized systems that neglect the situatedness of phenomena. Europanto hence sketches an antifoundational middle ground between the absolutist singularity of the national community and the hegemonizing generality of globalization. As it promotes relationships of identification across frontiers, rather than predetermined, self-contained identities, Europanto also shows that the porosity of European geographical, linguistic, and conceptual boundaries does not imply radical erasure of borders but rather their redefinition as lines of contact that reshape identity as alterity, marked by a difference within itself.

Marani hence substantiates the claims of another Italian contemporary writer immersed into cultural pluralism and linguistic hybridity, Claudio Magris, who, having filtered his italianità through the experience of the border, claims that the frontier is a necessity precisely because without the distinction it provides there would be no identity and no form, no individuality and no real existence. Because the frontier is itself form and hence also art.

Grazie beaucoup, muchas thanks, viele merci, moltissime danke. And if you wish to « manducate or savourate eine glas of weisse sweete petillante vino » we'll have a small reception to reward your patience, right after the Question-and-Answer period.¹⁵

NOTES

¹ *Daunbailò [Down by law]* (1986), directed by Jim Jarmusch, interpreted by Roberto Benigni, Tom Waits and John Lurie.

² Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000) 16.

³ Diego Marani, "DE EUROPANTO BRICOPOLITIK: Que viva la Mamma!" <http://www.europanto.be/euro10.html#480> [Last accessed December 6, 2010]

⁴ Diego Marani, “In pizza wir trust”, <http://www.europanto.be/euro12.html#660> [Last accessed December 6, 2010]

⁵ Diego Marani, “Europanto. From productive process to language”, *Mediamatic* 9 (4), 1999:1. <http://www.mediamatic.net/article-5694-en.html> [Last accessed December 6, 2010]. More recently, in *Come ho imparato le lingue*, Marani defines Europanto not as a language but as a game (“l’europanto non e’ una lingua ma un gioco”) and provocatively claims that anything can be acceptable to build a Europantic vocabulary—from soccer players’ names to car makes, restaurant menus and advertising—and foster understanding. See *Come ho imparato le lingue* (Milano: Bompiani, 2005): 126-27.

⁶ “Linguistic virus let loose on English” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/220511.stm> [Originally published Monday November 23, 1998. Last accessed on December 6, 2010]

⁷ Diego Marani, “DE EUROPANTO BRICOPOLITIK: De europantica eloquentia” <http://www.europanto.be/euro3.html> [Last accessed December 6, 2010]

⁸ Diego Marani, *Las Adventures des Inspector Cabillot* (Paris: Mazarine, 1998): 11.

⁹ James Clifford, *Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997): 9.

¹⁰ Diego Marani, “Es un crimen hacer de la lengua un element ideologico,” http://elmundolibro.elmundo.es/elmundolibro/2005/02/08/narrativa_extrangeras/1107880862.html [Last accessed December 6, 2010].

¹¹ Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene* (London: Verso 2002): 89.

¹² Diego Marani, “Euroarmada” <http://www.europanto.be/euro14.html#820> [last accessed December 6, 2010]

¹³ Diego Marani, “Langues et créativité: un parcours à moitié biblique et à moitié fantastique,” *Expolangues*, Paris, January 17, 2009 : 6. <http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/news/expolangues17jan09/diego-marani.pdf> [Last accessed December 6, 2010].

¹⁴ Unpublished text, kindly provided by the author.

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