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**"I Am Always a Journey." The Work of Franco Biondi**

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Franco Biondi moved as a child with his family, who worked as showmen, from place to place. In 1965 he followed his father's example and emigrated to Germany. That meant *movement, always being somewhere else and not having what we understand by homeland*. That was the explanation of *this longing for freedom, for self-determination, the profound wish to do as one liked*. This longing becomes an obligation, carrying with it Biondi's social and literary commitment when he enters the world of the so-called 'guest workers.'

The attempt to process and give new literary form to experienced reality from the viewpoint of a member of a minority – and Biondi wrote at first in Italian – is a first definition of time and place. *This feeling of not belonging anywhere/and of always being shut out again* is not suffering from a foreign place, we read, but *the anonymous place of my self-assertion*.

Even in the 70s Biondi is distinguishing himself from those Italian emigrants to Germany for whom writing poetry and short prose texts was a survival strategy. In numerous programmatic drafts he tries to give a concrete direction to this literature born of the multicultural process: glorifying, sentimental clinging to the past, the homeland (the 'terra madre') cannot be the perspective of a textual product referred to at first as *literature of dismay* from the perspective of the foreign minority. Provocation and criticism on the one hand, enlightenment and understanding on the other hand, seem at first to emphasize the sociopolitical commitment of these texts.

The gradual assimilation of German, a foreign language, is less a hesitant groping than a creative and critical engagement with the language of the majority. Increasingly Biondi sharpens his language into a literary instrument of debate.

The poem written in 1979, "Not just Guest-Worker German," strikingly stylizes the process of unassisted acquisition of language and emphasizes this speech variant as the expression of social marginalization.

With his stories Biondi begins to widen thematically the horizon of experience of this minority which was developing in Germany. The characters in these texts are in search of direction in their lives abroad. They experience social exclusion, painful changes within their family relationships and a break with their past.



The story "Passavantis Rückkehr" (Passavanti's Return), written in 1976, is not only a good example of the realistic mode of description preferred by Biondi. With the conflict situation of the protagonist Passavanti, who has become alienated from his place of origin and finally becomes certain that he must emigrate to Germany, Biondi is signalling the condition of 'not belonging' and 'dual outsidership' which he uses over and over again in his narrative strategy as a viewpoint of perception and which he transforms aesthetically into a space of experience.

In his first longer prose text, *Abschied der zerschellten Jahre* (Parting from the Shattered Years), the foreign country means experience of a threat to existence. The protagonist Mamo, a young foreigner threatened with deportation, is prepared to defend his identity against the power of the majority by force.

Franco Biondi's literary development took a remarkable course from then on: without sacrificing any critical content, in his first novel, *Die Unversöhnlichen* (The Irreconcilables), he explores the experience of foreignness on the linguistic level. The foreignness fundamentally inherent in language is probed, and simultaneously its reliability in relation to the individual's own foreignness is tested. Language is made *habitable*.

The German that he has transformed into a literary language of his own becomes a constant field of experimentation. Undreamed-of verbal inventions and an immense wealth of images now indicate the creative potential that could be set free out of distance from the foreign tongue.

Biondi's writing is autobiographical. The experience of discontinuity in relation to the past, the different stages of development in Germany and the use of a literary language without a *historical memory* is an essential aspect of the literary process.

In the novel, *The Irreconcilables*, past and present are in a complicated interrelationship with each other. The first-person narrator Dario Binachi recognizes that he leads a life in Germany *chasing after ghosts and things* because he, having lost the present, shapes it in such a way *that it turns into the past, into nostalgic memories, into mislaid dreams which I then tried to expel from my life*. He experiences a *gulf between me and myself, a rift in memory*. The return to his place of origin (which was not in reality undertaken until the novel was finished, as the reader discovers in the prologue that was written later) and the questioning of relatives are intended to help him to discover his own history. It is supposed to be a return to specific sections of his life.



The narrator comes to understand this confrontation with the past as the essential condition for his present life. It is simultaneously a challenge to have it out with his identity as an author, acquired abroad, which becomes clear through his plan not only to probe for his origins but to process them in a novel: through his imaginary counterpart (his second self), the author Franco Biondi, who pursues him, wants to steal the novel from him, and whom he must kill; and through the explicit description of the writing process (writer's block, doubt over the choice of narrative point of view, etc.).

The reader of this novel is ensnared in an artfully woven net of flashbacks, episodic insertions, self-reflections and dream interpretations, which makes the reading process a strenuous but definitely rewarding enterprise. To follow a story of discontinuity also means coming to terms with an extremely creative language, which tries to reflect the breaks and fractures in detail and of necessity generates an inventory of images that communicates the author's specific foreign experience. *Tracker! Gladly the seeker of his origins returns home, far from his origins, when you have transformed estranged metaphors into your own.*