

Franco Biondi 1947–

Franco Biondi is one of the most important representatives of current migrant literature in Germany. Through his literary texts, his theoretical essays, and his activities as a publisher, he has had a significant influence on the development of this literary phenomenon.

Biondi started his literary career at the beginning of the 1970s. The author, who first saw his literary achievements as a part of a European workers' literature, soon joined the *Werkkreis Literatur der Arbeitswelt* (Literature Workshop for Workers). As he did not feel that the interests of the labor immigrants were fully represented there, he became involved in ALFA (*Associazione Letteraria e Faccoltà Artistiche*), the first organization of migrant writers in the Federal Republic of Germany, which was formed in 1975. Many of his early poems and narratives were published in *Il Mulino*, a literary magazine that was founded by members of this group. ALFA saw itself as a representative of the Italian immigrants and enhanced the publication of texts in the Italian language. The writing that was promoted by the group could often be characterized as therapeutic. In many cases it was motivated by homesickness. It mirrored the authors' idealized images of their home country and their illusory dreams of a successful and happy return. By that time, however, the population of labor migrants in Germany had already become a multinational phenomenon and German had become a lingua franca among the workers. Many of them had given up hopes of return and started to settle down in the foreign country.

As a consequence of these changes, Biondi soon distanced himself from ALFA's regressive concept. In 1980, along with writers from 12 different countries, he founded the *Polynationaler Literatur- und Kunstverein* (PoLiKunst; Polynational Literature and Art Association). He also was the cofounder of the multinational publishing collective *Südwind* (Southern Wind). Within the framework of these groups, he formulated—

in cooperation with Rafik Schami—the first program of a multinational literature movement that was set up by members of ethnic minorities in Germany. In their essay *Literatur der Betroffenheit* (1981; *Literature of Involvement*), Biondi and Schami insisted upon the expression *Gastarbeiterliteratur* (*Literature of Labor Immigrants*) to characterize their literary and political activities. The authors deliberately chose this term in order to turn a word that was used to discriminate against these workers into a weapon of their own and to classify their writing as a political act. *Gastarbeiterliteratur* was described as a means of creating a feeling of unity among the various ethnic minority groups. It also aimed to enforce political change by informing the German public about the reality of ethnic minorities in their society and by evoking their emotional and political involvement. During the 1980s, Biondi coedited several anthologies by *Südwind* and *PoLiKunst*, which were distributed by alternative publishing houses and which helped increase the German readership's awareness of writing by ethnic minorities. Unfortunately, these publications also contributed to the pejorative reception of this literature as a homogenous phenomenon that should be valued mainly as a reflection of *Gastarbeiter* reality. The failure of the *Gastarbeiterliteratur*-concept soon became evident. In 1985, *PoLiKunst* disbanded. Biondi, like other writers, spoke out for an individualization of immigrant literature and for a stronger emphasis on aesthetic forms.

Biondi's literary work highlights the different stages in the development of immigrant experience. His early writing is dedicated to the problems of first-generation labor immigrants. Their alienation from their native countries and their marginalized existence in Germany are the main themes of his prose and poetry. Biondi's narrative *Passavantis Rückkehr* (1982; *Passavanti's Return*), which was first published in Italian in 1976, features an immigrant who tries to return to his village in southern Italy af-

ter having lost his job in Germany. However, Passavanti's dreams of a smooth return are doomed to failure. He is mocked by his former friends because of his lack of success. In addition, the idealized image of his home that he cherished during his stay in Germany does not stand up to reality. After a tragic incident during a drinking competition at the village pub, he is definitively expelled from the community and returns to Germany—this time for good, he says. The protagonist's name "Passavanti" means "the one who moves forward." Paradoxically, Passavanti's progress lies in his return to Germany—in his turning away from his illusionary dreams.

A particular emphasis in Biondi's early poetry is placed upon the struggle of the labor immigrants with the German language and the disparagement by the Germans of the *Gastarbeiterdeutsch* (the German spoken by foreign workers). The author often includes this language variety into his texts, thereby turning a discriminated means of expression into an art form. His poem *Nicht nur Gastarbeiterdeutsch* (1979; Not Only Gastarbeiterdeutsch) follows an immigrant's attempts to express his anger about discrimination and his demands for equality in the German language. Like Passavanti, the protagonist of this poem progresses. His linguistic confidence gradually grows and so does his political conscience.

In his novella *Abschied der zerschellten Jahre* (1984; Farewell of the Shattered Years), Biondi concentrates on the situation of third-generation immigrants who were born in Germany and often define themselves as Germans, but are excluded from their native country by a rigid law on aliens. His protagonist, Mamo, is threatened with extradition. He barricades himself in his flat with a weapon in order to fight for his right to stay. The real reason for his act of rebellion is his objection to the *Gastarbeiter* stereotypes that are common in German society. Mamo does not want to identify with the images of the fatalistic or homesick labor migrant. For Mario, they apply to his father's generation. Nevertheless, those images are constantly forced on him and cut back his possibilities of constructing his own identity.

In his novels *Die Unversöhnlichen: Im Labyrinth der Herkunft* (1991; The Irreconcilables: In the Maze of Origin) and *In deutschen Küchen* (1997; In German Kitchens), Biondi again returns to the condition of first-generation immigrants. Both texts focus on the idea that former labor migrants have established themselves as members of ethnic minorities in Germany. They feel the urge to appraise their past in order to come to terms with the fragmentations of their identity, which happened in the different stages of their migrant life. Looking back on his early years as a *Gastarbeiter*, the protagonist of *In deutschen Küchen* reaffirms Passavanti's cognition, that emigration is a final decision. It does not allow the possibility for return.

SABINE FISCHER

Biography

Born in Forlì, Italy, 8 August 1947. Trained as a welder; emigrated to Germany, 1965; worked in various factory and assembly line jobs, 1965–75; attended evening school, from 1971, and eventually received the German Abitur, or high school diploma; studied psychology, 1976–82; currently director of a social and pedagogical counseling center in Hanau, near Frankfurt; published his first poems in the Italian immigrant journal *Il Mulino*; cofounded an editorial series for migrant literature, *Südwind Gastarbeiterdeutsch*, with Jusuf Naoum, Suleman Taufiq, and Rafik Schami, 1980, as well as the Polynationale Literatur- und Kunstverein, a transnational forum for literature and the arts. Adelbert von Chamisso Prize, with Gino Chiellino, 1987.

Selected Works

Fiction

Passavanti's Rückkehr. Erzählungen, 1982
Abschied der zerschellten Jahre: Novelle, 1984
Die Unversöhnlichen, oder, Im Labyrinth der Herkunft, 1991
In deutschen Küchen, 1997

Poetry

Nicht nur Gastarbeiterdeutsch: Gedichte, 1979
Ode an die Fremde: Gedichte, 1973–93, 1995

Essays

Literatur der Betroffenheit, 1981
 "Über den literarischen Umgang mit der Gastarbeiteridentität," with Rafik Schami, in *Ein Gastarbeiter ist ein Türke*, 1983
Von den Tränen zu den Bürgerrechten: Italienische Emigrantenliteratur in der Bundesrepublik, 1984
Das Fremde wohnt in der Sprache, 1986

Edited Work

Zwischen Fabrik und Bahnhof: Prosa, Lyrik und Grafiken aus dem Gastarbeiteralltag, 1981

Further Reading

Fischer, Sabine, and Moray McGowan, "From Pappkoffer to Pluralism: Migrant Writing in the German Federal Republic," in *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration*, edited by Russell King, et al., London and New York: Routledge, 1995
 Möhrle, Katja, "Franco Biondi: Ein literarischer Spurensucher," in *Letteratura de-centrata: Italienische Autorinnen und Autoren in Deutschland*, edited by Caroline Lüderssen and Salvatore A. Sanna, Frankfurt: Diesterweg, 1995
 Krehel, Rüdiger, and Ulrike Reeg, editors, *Werkheft Literatur: Franco Biondi*, Munich: Iudicium, 1989
 Reeg, Ulrike, *Schreiben in der Fremde: Literatur nationaler Minderheiten in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Essen: Klartext, 1988
 Rösch, Heidi, *Migrationsliteratur im interkulturellen Kontext: Eine didaktische Studie zur Literatur von Aras Ören, Aysel Özakin, Franco Biondi, und Rafik Schami*, Frankfurt: Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 1992