



## **International conference “The Dialects of the Tribe” (Call for Papers)**

The Centro Linguistico d'Ateneo (Language Centre) of the University of Florence, the Réseau Européen de Littératures Comparées, the Associazione Italiana per lo Studio della Teoria e della Storia Comparata della Letteratura (Italian Association for the Study of the Comparative Theory and History of Literature) and the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the University of Florence are organising the international conference *The Dialects of the Tribe* for 15-17 September 2005.

At a time when Europe is struggling to achieve not only economic, but also political unification, European universities are called upon to experiment forms of language teaching which can offer their graduates professional opportunities within this European dimension. University teaching must thus embrace this European dimension in its approach to European culture and language, in accordance with the European reference scale of language ability levels. It often seems to be thought that this simply implies teaching English as the sole language, but it is instead a question of creating a European language sensitivity and of considering Europe as the case of a community speaking different languages however related to a common cultural background. The Europe of the future must be a multilingual and multicultural community. It is with this prospect in mind that the international conference *The Dialects of the Tribe* is conceived.

What does it mean to be European? Participation in a common market? Adherence to constitutional principles and common laws? Or, looking beyond the different identities and cultural and linguistic traditions, should we be aiming at the construction of a common sense of belonging?

Cultural and linguistic differences create roughly-drawn borders between different national traditions, different identities, different groups. These borders are often blurred and hard to distinguish. On the other hand, despite the traditionally stratified nature of the various national literary and artistic productions, European tradition does have common emblems, symbols, genres, styles and themes which must be considered as signs of belonging to a recognisable common matrix, a single, albeit varied and differentiated, tradition. There is no doubt that European figurative arts and music speak a common transnational language, marked by a common history of taste and of representations. Even European political history, marked by conflicts and wars, has created a common pool of experience which has in fact led to the need to found a community. But every community necessarily generates a sense of belonging and an awareness of identity.

The title of the conference comes from a poem by Mallarmé (*Le tombeau d'Edgar Allan Poe*) but also from Eliot (*The Four Quartets*). In his essay "Tradition and Individual talent", Eliot in fact speaks of a "European Mind". In Mallarmé's formulation there is of course the idea that the duty of the poet is "to give the words of the tribe a purer meaning", and for Eliot too purifying and refining "the dialect of the tribe" is the specific task of literature. The title we propose does not refer to any single dialect of the tribe, but to Europe's common cultural tradition and common cultural memory.

What is required is a reflection on the problems posed by the new multiethnic and multicultural developments; these form a complex mosaic with a pattern of colours and lines whose details must be clearly defined in order to understand their profound implications. A series of initial questions must be answered. The matter of linguistic differences is a fundamental one. It must thus be meditated upon bearing in mind on the

one hand the need for transnational communication and a common language; on the other hand, the deeply-felt need to preserve minor languages, and minor cultural identities but also all the different national languages.

The intention of the Florentine conference is thus to open a discussion on these problems in the attempt to define a common ground, a common cultural language. We should bear in mind the policies for the safeguard of the European and regional minority languages which have been strongly supported by the Council of Europe through the framework convention for the protection of minorities and the European charter for regional languages; also by the EU through the Maastricht and Amsterdam treaties. These may clearly weaken the old national cohesions and foment demands for autonomy, but they do show that Europe accepts the challenge of diversity as a factor not of disintegration but of integration within diversity. It should however be noted that no need is apparently felt to defend the various national languages, and indeed that the common language of Europe is increasingly becoming a strange version of English which lacks any clear identity and which certainly cannot solve the problem of European cultural integration.

European tradition also passes through the formation of national languages and identities. And this is a starting-point which should not be forgotten, even in the present complex European reality of emigrations from other continents which are bringing in new cultural traditions and new languages, shaping an ever more complex cultural and linguistic mosaic. This situation creates new problems and new needs, not least those regarding cultural and linguistic policies, and multiform sensitivities and identities.

There are no indications from the Council of Europe in this sense, despite the fact that these matters are an everyday reality in many European countries, and affect not only schools, with their multilingual and multicultural classes, but also the very way in which emigrants participate in the life of the host country: the knowledge of its laws and regulations, their relationship with its bureaucracy and with its administration.

The Florentine conference will focus on all the questions posed by the processes of cultural integration, by the need to build up awareness of a common multicultural and multi-linguistic identity.

## **Section 1. Language and Identity**

### **► Roots**

Every word we say in the different languages spoken in Europe has a history. Every word, every expression, reflects a centuries-old historical experience, and in every word we pronounce there is a history of group identities. In every word we pronounce there is, so to speak, an unfathomable, dizzying dimension. A key to the understanding of the Indo-European and the classic Greek and Latin languages, as well as of the ancient Germanic, Slav or Finno-Ugric ones, can be found in their common identifications, their differences and their hybridisation with other different and yet contiguous traditions.

### **► National languages and identities**

How and when were national languages born? How and when were the national identities and nations of Europe born? European identity is a mosaic of national identities, stereotypes and typical marks of identification attributed by each national identity to the other. The reconstruction of these histories and the history of these stereotypes also means investigating identity shaping factors, as well as the question of a common European multifaceted, multilingual and multicultural identity.

### **► Linguistic and cultural hegemonies**

There are periods and places in the cultural and political history of Europe in which one particular culture and language has exerted a hegemony over the others, sometimes as

a consequence of political factors, other times for cultural reasons. The cultural and linguistic colonisation on the part of the Latin world is of course the typical example, but in all cases, from Alexander the Great, to the Greek colonisation of the Mediterranean, to the colonialism of the modern era (particularly on the part of Spain, England and France), one of the conquerors' most obvious strategies has always been imposition not only of their political power but also of their language. On the other hand, the Italy of the Renaissance did not exert any political hegemony, while certainly exerting a very recognisable cultural hegemony. Moreover, cultural hegemonies have been exerted at different times in Europe by France, England, Germany and Russia. And there are many writers who have chosen to write in languages other than their mother-tongues (Conrad in English; Beckett and Ionesco, later Kundera, in French; Georg Brandes, Lukacs and Kafka in German). And there are European languages, notably English and French, but also Portuguese, which have exerted their cultural hegemony on the colonised countries, whose writers find a post-colonial identity of their own in their post-colonial language.

### ► **Linguistic and cultural minorities, multicultural and multilingual politics**

Gone are the "melting-pot" politics of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Melting pot policies" were not limited to the United States: the case of linguistic unification in Italy following political unification, the practically total suppression of the Celtic cultural and linguistic traditions in Great Britain are significant examples of a long lasting imperialistic approach to the linguistic and cultural question. We have now moved on to multicultural policies which can address the problems raised by emigration, immigrants setting up communities of "others" within national monocultural contexts. Language education is not the least of the problems in what is undoubtedly an extremely complex situation. How can the new realities of this "mosaic", which Italy has also now been experiencing for some years, be dealt with? Are the cultural politics of the "melting pot" still with us? And what culture, what literature, in other words what system of values, what mosaic identity, should today be created for culture and language teaching within increasingly heterogeneous social and educational contexts?

### ► **Teaching foreign languages in connection with the cultures they express**

English seems today to have become the *passe-partout* language. Actually this "English" is a kind of quite artificial non-language, with a limited vocabulary serving mere instrumental purposes. It is a language of non-belonging and non-identity, and a language cut off from its original tradition, without any cultural stratification and without any memory. From a comparative point of view, learning foreign languages means broadening one's own cultural memory and recognising one's own language in the other's language, one's own tradition in the other's tradition, while conserving an awareness of the differences.

## **Section 2. Cultural Tradition**

### ► **Literature and the arts**

The conference proposes to examine languages from the comparative viewpoint, and its aim is to identify the main features of a European textuality. By "text" and "textuality" I mean a general textuality and a European text which will be complex, heterogeneous and stratified, a polyvalent compendium of European tradition. This "text" is formed not only from the texts and monuments of literary tradition, but also from the relationships between the various arts: the temporal arts, like literature and music; the spatial ones like the visual arts; and the arts exploiting both dimensions, like the

performing arts, theatre and cinema. We are thus aiming at attracting papers which will focus on transcodification, medial translation, cross-influences.

► **Periods in the history of European culture. Cultural irradiation centres. Cultural capitals**

The Italy of the Renaissance; the Spain of the *Siglo de Oro*; the France of the Grand Siècle, the France and England of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries; the France again of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Paris of the *avant-gardes*; the Germany of *Sturm und Drang* and Romanticism; the Russia of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: these are only a few macroscopic examples of cultural irradiation centres in the history of Europe. Likewise for music: Italy and Germany from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; for figurative arts: again France from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The term "hegemony" indicates that a language and a culture can expand with the expansion of political and military domination. Actually, there are moments at which even weak political entities can express strong cultures with wide-reaching effects. On the other hand it is evident that in the melting-pot politics from the 17<sup>th</sup> through the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, at the moment when national states emerged, the question of identity passed not only through linguistic education but also through the definition of a dominant imposed cultural model which aimed at cancelling all differences. There are cities like Florence, Rome, Paris, Madrid, Barcelona, London, Vienna, Prague, Budapest, St. Petersburg and Moscow that have from time to time, sometimes in a parallel way, become the capitals of European culture, places to which intellectuals and artists emigrated, but also places of cultural hybridisation, so that hegemonies can also be seen as agents of contamination and hybridisation.

► **Influences, translations, imitations, rewritings; transnational compendia and palimpsests**

It goes without saying that European culture and European cultures in the various languages are transnational, and that ideas are also transmitted with travellers from one country to another. Translators, imitators, cultural mediators of various kinds were the most potent factor of integration in the Europe of the middle ages and early modern period. Thus every European work is a kind of compendium, a kind of palimpsest in which other writings and other images from other places can be detected. Each European text is marked by the tradition it belongs to, conveying not only a sense of common identity but also its particularity and "difference".

► **Themes and models linking European literature to the other arts**

There is a common set of European themes which has been built up through reciprocal influences and cultural permeability, but also through common experiences and images. Patterns of themes have been formed by class differences, as well as national, local, family and gender differences, and by the taste and identity of their interpreters.

► **Forms, genres, styles of literary expression in Europe**

It is common knowledge that similar forms and genres are present in European cultural history: the epic, the novel, poetry, theatre. Genres, movements, styles also have common trademarks which are quite easy to identify in the common models, great books and fundamental texts of the different periods.

► **Should European literature be taught?**

This question has parallel implications with the one about national languages, the defence of these languages, and the mosaic-like conditions of Europe. Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup>, and for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, literary teaching had an important role in language education and in the building up of collective identities. In the Europe of the third

millennium, the globalised world of TV, electronic information, multimedial communication, cinema, we should be asking ourselves what place there is still for literature, what place for the formation of myths and fictions in the era of the construction of a collective identity and sense of belonging; we might even ask ourselves what dangers are there in all this; and again what place is there for literature in language teaching?

The conference will take place on three days from 15 to 17 September 2005. The mornings will be given over to plenary sessions by invitation (30-35 mins.), with spaces for discussion of the papers presented. The afternoons will be dedicated to seminars for which we call for papers (15 mins.). The seminar papers will be organised into two parallel sessions dedicated to **Language and Identity** and **Cultural Tradition**. The seminars in parallel sessions will also however offer ample space for interventions not previously booked.

Proposals for the presentation of papers must be sent by the 15<sup>th</sup> of April 2005 to the following address: [convegno@cla.unifi.it](mailto:convegno@cla.unifi.it)

The languages of the conference are English, French and Italian.