

Words and pomegranates: poetry as wordplay in Toti Scialoja

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The poetic work of the famous Italian painter Toti Scialoja (1914-1998) offers a privileged standpoint on the relationship between wordplay and poetry.

Having started as an hilarious and nonsense poet for children, Scialoja writes rhythmic alliterative verses playing with words and even composing anagrams. His writing technique, as Scialoja declares it, is based on the phonic enchantment for a word, that like a pomegranate disseminates its “syllabic and anagrammatic seeds” from which the whole text springs up. This idea resembles, but is not inspired by Saussure’s theory of anagrams – keywords that in poems loosen their “maillles phoniques pour devenir un canevas” (Starobinski, 1971: 65) – and compels to reconsider poetry in the light of its disregarded connection with wordplay.

Moving from the thorough classification of *Sprachspiele* made by F. J. Hausmann (1974), and from a critical reconsideration of the rhetoric figure of paronomasia, we offer a typological inventory of Scialoja’s verses which will illustrate similarities and differences between the two categories (wordplay and paronomasia) on the basis of the different semantic effects achieved - the big divide consisting mainly in the semantic level involved and the kind of meaning opposition realized by the figures. In particular, following Hausmann, we distinguish among genuine wordplays, that accomplish a compete double meaning or unresolvable ambiguity, and paronomasia that, on the basis of phonic similarity, causes an interruption in the text conceptual *continuum* (De Beaugrande-Dressler, 1981), inducing metalinguistic reflections and different sense effects.

We complete the inventory of poetic figures based on wordplay, discussing the role of massive alliterations in Scialoja’s work which, following Saussure (in Starobinski, 1971: 27), we call anaphonie, or:

la simple assonance à un mot donné, plus ou moins développée et plus ou moins répétée, mais ne formant pas anagramme [...].

References

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