

“When the house burns one forgets even lunch.
Yes, but one eats it later in the ashes.”
(F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*)

“Leaden Years, Separated Bodies, Government Massacres,
Subversion, Emergency, or the opposite: The Best Years of our Life,
Radical Transformation of Daily Life, Utopia, Need for Communism,
Sexual Revolution, Armed Struggle, etc.”
(N. Balestrini and P. Moroni,
L'orda d'oro)

Re-mapping Autonomous Spaces and Invisible Communities in Nanni Balestrini's Testimonial Narrative*

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Forty thousand accused, fifteen thousand ‘passed’ through
prison, six thousand sentenced, almost always without any
guarantee of the right to a defense. Behind the numbers,
the ‘special prisons’, torture, solitary confinement, the
best part of two generations reduced to silence, forced into
exile. (Balestrini and Moroni 14)¹

* A version in Italian of this essay is included in Alain Sarrabayrouse, ed.
Images Littéraires de la Société Contemporaine. Actes du colloque
“Guerre et violence dans la littérature contemporaine italienne.”
Université Stendhal-Grenoble 3, 21-22 novembre 2003. Cahiers
d'études italiennes 3 (2005):75-87.

¹ All translations from *L'orda d'oro* are mine.

How does one tell of all this? – Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni ask provocatively in the introduction to *L'orda d'oro*, a text which is, in my opinion, even today indispensable when attempting to focus on the historical, political and existential events that characterized the decade 1968-1977 in Italy. But it is precisely the will, the desire to give voice and “visibility” to all this that pushes the authors of the volume meticulously to record the problematic events of those years, even though they recognize the “outrageous subjectivism” out of which their project takes shape. A project that becomes even more interesting when one considers how macroscopic the process of repression and concealment has until now seemed – a process carried out by the governmental and mass-media structure through “a gigantic mechanism for falsifying the history of that decade, which found its linguistic synthesis in the distressing definition of ‘leaden years’” (Balestrini and Moroni 2). It is therefore for these reasons also that we must try to locate “fragments and paths” which once again give “visibility”, and which save the creative, revolutionary impulse that characterized the history of the movement of the 1970s from oblivion and mystification.

An analogous “testimonial” project is the one that Nanni Balestrini proposes, in the narrative domain, in *Gli invisibili*, where the author in fact seems to wish to leave the narrative, geographical and existential journey of his protagonist provocatively suspended, in an effort to confront the reader, here at the end of the novel, with a possible, and necessarily problematic, political awakening. And at the same time to place before him/her a “visualization” of what the ideology of the Italian nation-state was trying instead to relegate to the comforting domain of invisibility, obliterating the desires and needs of an explosive and destabilizing collective subjectivity in that place “where all of the present society’s coercion and absurdities condense – namely, prison” (Rossanda VII):

we made holes in all the wire mesh grilles and then we made the torches the torches were made with bits of sheets tied tightly together and then soaked in oil and for this too we agreed a time in the middle of the night we all lit the oil of the torches and we pushed these brands through the holes in the grilles but there was no one there to see this either the torches burned for a long time it must have been a beautiful sight from outside all those torches flickering against the black wall of the prison in the middle of that boundless plain but the only ones who could see the torchlight were those few people driving their cars that sped like tiny darts in the distance on that black ribbon of the motorway several kilometres from the prison or maybe an aeroplane flying above but they fly very high up there in the silent black sky and they see nothing. (Balestrini, *The unseen* 241-42)

But it is precisely by revisiting those places of violence and coercion, in the company of the first-person narrator, that it becomes possible, at least in the literary domain of the narrated elements, to surpass the boundary wall of prison space and enter into contact with a disturbing and dramatic reality which nevertheless allows for a destabilizing “porousness” (in the Benjaminian sense) between “inside” and “outside”, between public and private space, between official history and individual and “community” stories.

The novel therefore comes across as a provocative ideological and narrative project beyond the expectations of an audience of readers who, by contrast, were used to filtering the history of those creative and tumultuous years – the period that is of the student and labor movement struggles, of the rejection of work and conformity, the period of Autonomy, demonstrations, the occupation of universities and factories – through a more comforting and deceptive representation produced by the culture of mass-media. This occurs in the novel

primarily through the use of a documentary device (an interview), and of an oral language that attempts to make this representation more concrete and direct. “Oral language” understood, of course, not as a simple alternative to written language, but as a translation/transcription on paper of a collective discourse which was an integral part of the choral aspect of the emotional, historical, political and cultural complicity of those years.²

The “narrative *laissez*” which define the rhythmical unity of the narrative, and the semantic and strategic division of the text according to a “quasi fanatic obsession with the establishing power of numbers” (Gramigna) – the text is composed of 48 chapters divided in turn into paragraphs of between 12 and 15 lines each – “a numerological obsession”, as Balestrini himself describes it, give a formal and stylistic unity to the novel and act as a counterpoint to the intentional lack of punctuation, a lack which obviously indicates a radical avant-garde rejection of syntax and traditional vocabulary. In such a way, Balestrini, while preserving a basic formal rigor, effectively ends up destabilizing the semantic and syntactic structure of language, allowing his “spoken”, almost “magnetofonico” writing, to become an apt and effective instrument for the emotional, political and intellectual involvement of the reader. And the reader, precisely because of particular stylistic expedients – the fluidity and immediacy of spoken language, the conversational tone of the narration, repetitions, the constant use of deictics

² In this regard Italo Rosato, building on Calvino’s “lucid and nostalgically captivating” preface to *Il Sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, has noticed the substantial difference that separates this generation from that of the Resistance period: “The protagonists of the past decade have witnessed the dispersion of their utopias and – in the worst cases – they are witnessing the dissipation of their individual existences [...]. If only for the desire to break the silence – but of course not only for this – Balestrini’s efforts [...] seem to me of the greatest importance” (116).

(“this thing here”, “a hit right there”, etc.) – ends up, one hopes, coming to terms more directly with the problematic nature of the events narrated, and with the implicit foreignness of the existential and political experience of the protagonist and of the movement.

This Sergio, to whom the novel is dedicated (the person in question is Sergio Bianchi, an “autonomo” from Tradate, in exile in Paris), is moreover a character, who by force of circumstance, becomes a collective subject, in that he is the mouthpiece for the communal needs of the group, though he does not thereby “risk being stereotyped” (De Federicis). He appears instead as a corporeal, intellectual and human presence, who even in his representativeness, and in the immediate recognizability of his status as a narrating subject, representative of the events of the 70s, retains his own peculiar singularity and his own contradictory identity: an identity that Rossana Rossanda, in a review of the book, has suggested is “the fruit of a mine, a well of history and ideas upon which obscurity continues to reign, [and which] Balestrini [...] returns to its strength and fragility”.

So already in the incipit of the novel we are introduced to this “materiality of the suffering body, naked, beaten, broken, laid out, dead” (De Federicis) through the contextualization of the narrating subject, of this voice that says “I”, but which inevitably implies the communal presence of “us”, within the bounded and alienating space of prison:

The cellars are a maze of passageways lit every twenty or thirty yards by dusty fluorescent strip-lights swinging from long ragged electric wires that hang from the ceiling its rough cement fissured by long deep cracks [...] the air is damp and from our mouths come little puffs of vapour as we breathe that nauseating air [...] the irregular shuffling of the small silent procession merges with the continuous jangling

of the chains the sound echoes whenever the
gangways of rotting wood are crossed [...] the small
procession turns repeatedly to the right and the left to
the left and the right until all sense of direction is lost.
(Balestrini 1-2)

And it is precisely here on the first page that an interesting “spatial” dynamic begins to take shape, one which will characterize the whole novel, and which permits the protagonist to move according to a narrative path that is not linear or horizontal, but characterized instead by continual flashbacks which rather bolster the temporal verticality of a problematic recovery of the memory of those events. It is in short a nomadic path, and in some senses contradictory and unpredictable, one which however invites the reader to “relearn how to think space” (Augé 37) and to visualize problematically both the institutionalized places of power – necessary instruments through which the nation-state inevitably imposes its need “to discipline and punish”, to use a foucaultian expression – and the deterritorialized, liberating and creative spaces of the street, of the occupied areas and of the revolt, where “energy [...] is more disorganized and has fewer horizons of political thrust: it is more unbridled, it wastes away” (Nancy 51).

In the continuous dynamic tension between these two moments, the author’s project takes shape, and in fact succeeds in making functional his ideological intentions and his linguistic and formal strategies, through the use of specific analogies, metaphors and flashbacks. And this is precisely how, for example, the representation of the space of the school and the factory³ emblematically recalls the immediately preceding

³ Later on in fact, the author describes the condition of alienation and exploitation within the factory in these terms: “I didn’t have any really clear idea about that factory I saw it from outside as a vast dirty monstrosity that disgorged fumes into the air and stinking liquids into the river that ran alongside it the impression I got on the first morning of work was a grim one

representation of the prison space, both in the description and the position of objects (gates/iron bars/corridors/cement walls) and in the conflictual dynamics of the first-person narrator with the wielders of power (professors/prison guards/bosses):

The agreed day arrives and early in the morning before they open the gates we'd put up a big poster to announce the mass meeting and inviting everybody to come along [...] the headmaster Mastino gets in first as usual and he starts reading the poster then his face turns ugly and he scowls at us [...] then the teachers get there and read it without saying a word just look at us as though we're crazy a few minutes later out come a bunch of janitors that Mastino has told pull down the posters [...] I feel as if I'm watching the boss pacing in front of the factory in those stories I've read about the first workers' struggles the first strikes the same kind of intimidation. (Balestrini 6)

The internal spaces of the jail (as well as those external ones, in a significant parallel relationship, of the institutions and of the factory) therefore become “non-places” inside which are created “neither a single identity, nor a relation, but loneliness and likeness [...] they don't bring about any synthesis, they complete nothing, they authorize only [...] the co-existence of individualities – distinct, similar and indifferent to each other” (Augé 95 and 101). And this is why the mobilization in the squares “outside” and the prison revolt “inside” represent

[...] they showed me where I had to go there and then I already felt like leaving turning my back and away getting out of there and taking off when I saw my section a kind of long narrow corridor without windows there were only big skylights way up high and a terrible stink of solvents [...] the workers were all in black overalls except the foreman who had a white overall and who was in his office at the end of the corridor behind the glass screen from where he could keep an eye on the whole section” (161).

emblematic signs of the need to remap space, even if only momentarily, to deterritorialize these non-places in order to be able to imagine a different livability for one's own body, through the temporary definition of areas of autonomy and creativity that escape the authoritarian impositions of "constituted" power:

In town the youth groups have organized a festival in the cathedral square China and I take the train on our own we get earlier than we've arranged with the rest of our comrades and there's already loads of people the police are turned out in force all around there's graffiti being done on the walls and the ground free space is a right or make society a festival or let's reclaim life [...] we try to link arms and manage to form into a long snake that's not bad at all we can see the others from our collective they've all come they're in small groups mixed up with the rest the front of the march is heading straight for the cathedral square. (Balestrini 11)

Thus urban warfare temporarily destabilizes and disrupts the immobility of the "rigid" space of the city according to a *rhizomatic* plan which no longer resembles the planned and sanctioned tourist map – emblematically represented here by the reference to cathedral square – but becomes metaphorical, constitutive of the explosive and creative action (revolution) of the movement. Streets, squares and symbolic locations of the official history of the metropolis are thus transformed into "fleeting" areas, into indefinable zones of unpredictability that allow for a future reterritorialization of urban space, and within which one is able to move nomadically – fluidly and

dynamically⁴, but above all, festively – precisely because “festivals” represented as Lefebvre suggests, “Dionysiac life [and] differed from everyday life only in the explosion of forces which had been slowly accumulated in and via everyday life itself [...] revolutions of the past were festivals.”⁵

Yet it is precisely in order to contrast this representation of a festive spatiality that the author, in the subsequent pages, again transfers action and description into the prison in a way that is intentionally provocative and traumatic for the reader. And thus, due to the constant use of flashbacks which clearly allow for a fragmentary continuity of the spatio-temporal linearity of the narrated events, the protagonist’s story returns to the “non-place”⁶ of prison, where the authorities’ will to control and coerce expresses itself symbolically and macroscopically in the organization of a rigid, strategically planned structure, within which single individuals are forced to act mechanically and senselessly, following predefined, traced paths:

I got back to my cell and it was just a few minutes after I got back to my cell when I heard shouts coming from the direction of the rotunda I should explain what the rotunda is the special section of the prison we were in was a small three-storey block ground floor first floor and second floor and each

⁴ Lefebvre writes in *The Production of Space*: “Representational space [...] may be directional, situational or relational, because it is essentially qualitative, fluid and dynamic” (42).

⁵ Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, cit. in Andy Merrifield, *Metromarxism. A Marxist Tale of the City*, New York and London: Routledge, 2002, p. 83.

⁶ According to Marc Augé, “supermodernity naturally finds its complete expression in non-places [...] in non-places there is always a specific place for curiosities that are presented as such.” And, Augé continues, that is why, unlike modernity, “the space of supermodernity is marked instead by this contradiction: it deals only with individuals but ones who are identified, socialized and localized only at the entrance and exit” (Augé 99-101).

floor was split into two wings at the centre of these wings on every floor there were two gates and in between the two gates there was a space that was the rotunda the same rotunda where the stairs were and from there people dispersed into one wing or the other the right wing one side and the left wing on the other side I was in the left wing of the top floor the second floor that is. (Balestrini 26)

Thus, in my view, this continuous and parallel spatial progression between place and political community becomes symptomatic of the author's ideological intention and of the whole evolution of the narrated event. And it is this progression that is the site of the creative and antagonistic momentum of the movement as it occupies a space for action, a space which by force of circumstances tends to broaden itself and continually redefine its borders. At the same time, and in a move that is diametrically opposed, an inevitable narrowing and "tightening up" of that same space acts as a counterweight to the state's subsequent repression, but in a certain sense as well, to the intrinsic "disappearance"⁷ of the movement and of its desires and vain aspirations.

And in fact, the creative and revolutionary drives of the "street" are hampered and contained by the police and by the state's organs of control precisely because, as Debord reminds

⁷ In this regard, Balestrini writes: "We tried to spend the nights at the houses of comrades who considered themselves less known less exposed or better still staying with friends who weren't involved at all or staying with friends of friends the demonstrations and festivals in the square were a thing of the past the movement was like a great ghost absent withdrawn sheltering in its ghettos the stage was now held by the trickle of clandestine armed actions where responsibility was claimed by dozens of signatures of combat organizations in competition the life of the movement was over but for the comrades it wasn't over it wasn't as if they could stand on the sidelines saying let's wait and see because the repression involved everyone there weren't too many distinctions made" (17).

us, “efforts of all established powers to increase the means of maintaining order in the streets finally culminates in the suppression of the street” (172); and one sees this in the horrid and starkly “realistic” representation of the death of the student who is run over by the police “super-jeep” (for the record, the person in question is Giannino Zibecchi, killed in Milan on 17 April 1975):

very loud screaming shouting I see a lot of comrades running in that direction I can't see a thing there's smoke and confusion they all have red eyes crying with the teargas I get down from the shutter and head over there running with others we collide with others coming from the opposite direction anguished faces staring eyes some lower their kerchiefs one's running his hands through his hair I can't see what's happened there's a group of comrades standing in a semi-circle some are weeping it's not with the teargas some are sobbing one girl shouts something I don't understand then further on I see the bloody body on the ground I see the long trail of dark blood and further on I see the reddish mass of brains the wheels of the super-jeep have spattered out of it out of the head spattered out. (Balestrini 15)

In addition to being a documentary report of the history and the collective memory of those years, this real-life event fits into the “fictional” dimension of the story, projecting before the reader's eye an image that is as recognizable and unforgettable for its absurdity as it is disturbing for its ethical, political implications. But this also serves analogically to anticipate what will happen in the jail with the revolt and the utter violence of its repression. And thus parallel to it, and even in the authorial recognition of

the impossibility of “recounting”⁸ the historical and objective totality of those events, the prisoners’ attempt at resistance and autonomy within the prison unfolds at the pressing rhythm of oral language:

what happened and what then became known later or at least in part because these stories can’t always be told in full was that very quickly the comrades who’d taken the guards came down with the keys they’d taken from the guards they opened the gate [...] at this point I saw people wearing masks arriving in my wing they got to my cell and they unlocked every cell in the left wing they unlocked my cell too and then there was enormous confusion [...] and then we all poured out into the corridor [...] and from that moment the revolt was under way. (Balestrini 29-30)

The navigability of the prison site is thus redefined and reterritorialized, allowing for the movement and interaction of individuals who – at least in the conscious fleetingness of the event, before its “necessary” and violent repression, that is⁹ –

⁸ Balestrini writes: “And now here I’ve lost track of where I left off with this whole story also because there are loads of things I can’t remember that I’ve no clear memory of how they happened and there are also loads of things that can’t be remembered but can only be forgotten it’s not as if I want to tell the whole story of my life nor do I want to tell everything that happened during this time when so many different contradictory things of all kinds happened that put them all together and try to make sense of them seems to me quite impossible but what concerns me right now is just to speak about those things that happened to me but from my point of view of course just because maybe now it’s worthwhile speaking about it” (127).

⁹ The chilling image of suppression within the jail becomes emblematic through the “realistic” representation of a body that once again is tortured, abused and violated: “they were hitting out with truncheons with sticks with iron bars and this comrade who was small they really pulverized him then another scene I watched was a guy they took by the hair after having trampled him to the ground they dragged him up by the hair and stuck him up

are able to behave in ways that are not codified, but spontaneous and liberating. This produces a momentary state of euphoria and festivity, even within a space that is synonymous with alienation and anguish:

the atmosphere there was euphoric there was a festive atmosphere I can remember this great euphoria this excitement this festivity and what everyone was saying over and over again and what they were convinced of was that there could never ever be a military intervention by the guards by the *carabinieri* by the police [...] I can remember there was no anxiety whatsoever I can remember there was euphoria and excitement there was this mechanism triggered in everybody's head to see this situation as holding no danger and making everybody feel they were at a party. (Balestrini 45)

Thus the author's effective strategy allows the reader to imagine the impossible, to cross the "other" dimension of prison experience, and to come face to face with the reasons for the revolt – perhaps even involuntarily, precisely because "there are spaces in which the individual puts himself to the test as a spectator without being particularly interested in the spectacle itself" (Augé 80). Moreover, this points to a problematic awakening of the forms of resistance and struggle at work within the jail, which even in the implicit recognition of their

against the wall and then one of them hit him in the face with an iron bar just like this a blow with the iron bar like this across the face and they smashed his nose and his forehead [...] these were the things to be seen while we were there in the dark powerless behind the wire fence" (Balestrini 111). It seems important to me in this regard to underline how the "spectacle" of the massacre here again establishes a dynamic between inside and outside: the reader is in fact located outside, distanced from the event, but nevertheless powerlessly visualizes the scene, as the prisoners are powerless in the face of the "legalized" violence of the police and of the state.

transience¹⁰, nevertheless bear witness to the political reasons behind protest, and above all make believable the possibility of constantly re-inventing and remapping the non-places of alienation and tyranny in a festive and euphoric way.

But once again the strategic pattern of the narrative sequences allows for a permeability between “inside” and “outside”, a continual, parallel dialectical exchange of the public and private spheres.¹¹ The occupation of the Cantinone by the movement in fact represents, even in terms of narrative structure, a concrete and non-utopian image of the real possibility of “escaping” the bounds of prison space and of reintroducing creative situations of autonomy even in a “public” place. The appropriation of decrepit, semi-abandoned spaces like the Cantinone thus sets in motion not only a process of transformation and of self-governed political, economic and cultural productivity, but also (and more importantly) allows for a stimulating contamination between the movement and various communal urban realities (workers, artists, the unemployed, the aged, children, etc.)¹² precisely because, as Berman suggests,

¹⁰ What the protagonist states in this regard is symptomatic: “I think and a lot like me think so too that deep down we’ve never had not only have we never had any notion or desire to win but not even any notion that there was anything to be won anywhere and then you know if I really think about it now to me the word winning seems exactly the same as dying” (54).

¹¹ It is not in fact by chance that the relationship with China begins right during the occupation of the Cantinone: “The first time I met China was during the Cantinone occupation that’s where I first saw her China had come round there I’m not sure when and she was helping Gelso with the mural that Gelso had decided to do on the biggest wall she had a big brush and she was dipping it in a bucket of white paint but she was dipping it in too much and the paint was spattering all over the place and it was running down on to the floor I saw what a mess it was and I went over to show her how it should be done but also because I thought she was very pretty” (35).

¹² Balestrini in fact writes: “all this time new people were starting to turn up they came in groups the students who knew all about it already and then the first ones to come out of curiosity workers and unemployed people came

“their initiatives showed that obscure and decaying old places could turn out to be – or could be turned into – remarkable public spaces” (321). And so the creative chaos that sets apart the effective energy of the various communities that operate in this space, that is, inside and outside the occupied area, once again cannot be but festive and euphoric:

the party was at its height there was such euphoria such great excitement people coming in and out in and out in and out indescribable confusion they all really liked the place we should stay there they said we should stay there whatever it took we'd do terrific things in the Cantinone the music was blaring out loud as can be [...] they were all looking at the stage where somebody was singing I love to play pound out my music all day but I don't earn my wages that way for I play like a mule I'm a wild boy I wanna win I'm kinda rough but believe me I'm cool and I went to be with China right under the stage and I stayed right there holding her close while the music blared out loud as can be. (Balestrini 47)

As stated before, these situations of spontaneous aggregation which take shape in the nomadic transience of autonomous spaces are, by force of circumstance, momentary and “constitutive”, but they nevertheless represent an emblematic signal of the condition of the crisis and the unease of an entire culture, and therefore point to the need for radical change. Not coincidentally, in fact, the alienating dimension that characterizes the conflictual relationship of the narrating subject

who'd seen our posters and the leaflets word had got round and people turned up came in and hung about the place taking a good look round we were explaining why we'd occupied what we wanted to do now and people were talking asking questions [...] there were children running about the hall and going into the rooms upstairs it was total chaos” (38).

with his space reappears even in his suffocating and backward hometown:

The village where I lived was a shit-hole and the people in it were shitty people too I didn't like this village and I didn't like these people [...] if you don't know these villages if you don't live in one of them you can get confused you can easily mistake one village for another they're all alike in the middle there's the square which always happens to be the church square and they've invariably got the same main street running through the village with a few shops and one or two bars the school and the municipal offices [...] and the main street crossing the square going in one direction to the cemetery and in the other to the little railway station that links up all the little villages to one another. (88)

Here it seems precisely as if the same bounds reappear in a particularly terrifying manner, as in the non-place of the prison, by means of a narrative dynamic which nevertheless is part of a larger literary-cultural discourse regarding the problematic relation of city and country. In a certain sense, too, this dynamic serves to broaden the argument developed in this novel into a much more complex dimension that goes far beyond the text and the evolution of the narrative events, but which relates to meta-textual and meta-historical concerns of much wider scope as well. In this sense Guglielmi is perhaps correct when he maintains that in the novel, "political desperation becomes existential desperation" (138), even though, in my view, one cannot minimize the historical and political referentiality of the plot.

And moreover it does not seem random to me that towards the end of the novel, almost as if to signal the extinction of the creative and explosive parenthesis of the 70s and of the movement, and to underline more forcefully the implicit failure

of the “educative” intention of the prison system, the author wanted to represent the suicide of one of the protagonists of this story, emblematically, not inside but outside prison, by likening the bedroom of the family home, incredibly but significantly, to a prison cell. Thus demonstrating not only a political but also a philosophical and existential awareness of the fact that the condition of solitude and of alienation is not only related to the “monstrosity” of that space (which is in some senses reassuring because bounded), but reappears and is problematically magnified even “elsewhere”:

it seemed that Gelso no longer recognized anyone [...] he'd asked his parents not to let anyone into his room and he himself never left his room he also had his food brought to his room and within a few days he turned the room into a cell [...] and he started fixing it up like a cell with the same things prisoners use [...] and then one evening he acted out an escape he tied the sheets together and dropped down from the window they found him in the yard with a sprained ankle [...] and a month later one day they found him hanged in his cell which was his bedroom one morning they found him there he'd hanged himself with the sheets tied together that he'd used to act out the escape that he'd always had on his mind and that even now had failed him. (238-39)

The necessary “flight” from these non-places of authoritarian alienation “expressly organized to serve this pseudo-community that follows the isolated individual right into the family cell” (Debord 172), does not end in a predictable romantic sheltering in an “outside” which is non-existent and thereby utopian; it instead finds pragmatic possibilities for concrete realization precisely in the continuous, contingent political activity of the

movement¹³, which in its nomadic progress through these public spaces of modernity, continually tries to imagine and re-invent possible areas of survival and autonomy, “where people dynamically and spontaneously interact with their surroundings, surroundings where the antithesis between our inner and outer worlds...has been collapsed” (Merrifield 181).

I do not think it is therefore possible to speak with regard to this novel, as Spinazzola does, of “a sort of funeral oration, in novelistic form, of the movement for Autonomy [...] a wrecked vocation that is once and for all succumbing to the death instinct”, or as Colombo asserts, “of desolation without return”. For in the end, the revolutionary potential of this process of destabilization of the political and economic structure upon which the authoritarian logic of the nation-state is built and which finds its own emblematic representation precisely in the alienating condition of prison, the factory and the school, this potential speaks to the highly political, iron will “of the importance of writing” (Balestrini 166), as the protagonist himself suggests in a moment of the text which is above all a meta-narrative metaphor for the author’s ideological position.

And even if it is Balestrini himself who maintains that at bottom “literature is useless at the immediate level of praxis” (*Prendiamoci tutto* 16), this does not diminish from the fact that in this novel writing nevertheless becomes the exemplary witness to a collective and personal “history”. And this history (or really story, narrative) is the ideal instrument for a willed

¹³ This is why the movement assumes the lineaments of a large family for the protagonist: “my role is to be someone who’s going to goal now I was thinking about the comrades and this consoled me because I was thinking that now they would all be rallying round busy making efforts on my behalf they wouldn’t leave me to fend for myself and I was proud of the fact that I had all these comrades this big family that was taking responsibility for my situation and my problems that would think of everything [...] I felt that I wasn’t on my own I was part of a collective strength and this made me feel very strong” (123).

political participation in a process of “re-writing” the events of those years, and therefore of the implicit need for participation, for the intellectual and emotional contamination of the readership, perhaps because “it is [precisely] in the anonymity of the non-place that one experiences, alone, the commonality of human destinies” (Augé 110).

The fundamental issue therefore is to strive, in some way, to make the invisibility of this literary, political and historical experience at least “intuitable”, and perhaps to transform the deathly non-place that the prison becomes after the repression of the revolt – but which is also any street or square after the revolutionary “festivity” of the 70s – into something newly vibrant and alive. In short, an invitation to perform an act of resistance and protest against a “deaf” and “blind” society, illuminating “at least once” before our eyes this highly problematic reality, trying to free us from certain “verbal and mental automation” (Rosato 121), and to listen again to those “voices”, to visualize those bodies and those presences, and thereby to give space to their stories, while the others “fly very high up there in the silent black sky and they see nothing” (Balestrini 241).

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