

Nanni Balestrini's *Gli invisibili*: Fictional Spaces for an Epic Monument to the Seventies

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So history/ is not the steam shovel it's said to be/
leaving tunnels, crypts, manholes/ hiding places
behind. Some survive it./ History is benevolent too,
destroying/ what it can: better of course/ if more
were destroyed, but history is short/ on information
and long on vendettas./ History scrapes the bottom/
like a dragnet periodically/ hauled in. A few fish
escape,/ and at time you meet the ectoplasm/ of a
survivor, and he doesn't seem specially happy./ He's
unaware he's free, nobody's told him./ The others,
those in the net, think they're/ more free than he.
(Eugenio Montale, "History", *Satura*, trans. William
Arrowsmith)

Nanni Balestrini's *Gli Invisibili* was published in 1987, about a decade after the events that are the object of its narration. Bompiani published the novel after it was rejected by all the other publishers who were intimidated by the violent nature of its content and its political implications. Many factions of the Italian intellectual *milieu* greeted the novel with cautious and, on occasions, emotional comments symptomatic of the shared and deeply felt necessity to clarify once again personal ideological positions with regard to the events of '77 and the following 'leaden years.' To a certain extent it is arbitrary to isolate one single aspect dominating the whole range of the literary critics' reactions to *Gli Invisibili*. Yet, both favourable and unfavourable reviews seem to make their appraisals of the novel's value on the basis of its 'extra-literary' concerns – that is to say its clear-cut and lucidly carried out distinction between the "autonomia" generation on the one side and, on the other, the terrorist group

of the *Brigate Rosse* – Red Brigades.¹ Crucially, it is the author's refusal to grant a common ideological ground to the two parties that caused most objections to the novel.² Indeed, the publication of *Gli invisibili* seemed to offer the cultural pages of the major Italian newspapers one more opportunity to consider with hindsight one of the most controversial periods of contemporary Italian history.

Gli Invisibili was expected to be Balestrini's acknowledgement of intellectual responsibility and retrospective evaluation of his political involvement with the extra-parliamentary left.³ The most perplexed and uneasy reactions came from those former members of the Gruppo 63 who – on the pages of the journal *Quindici* – expressed their detachment from the students' movement in the face of the '68 events. In an article published in *La Repubblica* Alfredo Giuliani accounts for the novel's "almost neutral dramatization of failure

¹ The nature of the relationship between the social movements and the Red Brigades is one of the most controversial subjects within the politico-historical debate on the seventies. "Autonomia" was an ideological strain traversing many political experiences within the movement. It was founded upon the worker's refusal to work systematically carried out by means of sabotage, resistance against the logic of hierarchy in the factory and also by occasional and symbolic violent action. Robert Lumley has pointed out that the idea of proletarian violence was by no means exclusive to those choosing to engage in armed struggle yet "the Red Brigades combined what were disparate elements in the activities of the social movements to produce a systematic terrorist strategy" (280). See also Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni, *L'orda d'oro 1968-1977*, especially pp. 369-393.

² For an eloquent example of such an approach to the novel, see Geno Pampaloni's review "La solida prosa di un evasore". See also Rossana Rossanda, "Storia crudele di Sergio l'invisibile"; Vittorio Spinazzola, "Requiem per gli invisibili", and Lidia De Federicis, "Il selvatico sul cemento".

³ The so-called "7 April" investigation accused him to have taken part in armed activity. The charge of "banda armata" – together with all the other charges – proved later to be false.

[drammaticità quasi neutra del fallimento]” and “grotesque or desperate simplifications [semplificazioni grottesche o disperate]” as a signal of the ambiguous re-thinking on the part of the author:

A re-thinking that is mostly unconscious [...] and endows the novel with a pregnancy of truth and a compact mode of writing resigned to the facts, without emphasis [...]. The novel does not ask why nor how the 1977 rebellion failed. Furthermore, the hero explicitly refers to his group's “political” opinions on very few occasions – only three or four times and only for a few lines.⁴

Giuliani's use of inverted commas to specify the political connotations of the group hints at what he deems to be the major weakness of the novel, that is to say, its ideological poverty and lack of critical awareness. A similar implied statement of the novel's inadequacy to convey a discernible authorial stance came also from Renato Barilli who envisaged the rigorous identification between the narrating voice and the main character modelled on Sergio Bianchi⁵ as a prudential narrative device aiming at sweeping away any contrivable common

⁴ “Ripensamento per buona parte inconscio [...] che dà al libro uno spessore di verità e una compattezza di scrittura rassegnata ai fatti, senza enfasi [...] Il romanzo non si domanda perchè la ribellione del '77 è fallita, né racconta come ha fallito. E sono rarissimi, non più di tre o quattro e di poche righe, i momenti nei quali il protagonista riferisce esplicitamente le opinioni “politiche” proprie del suo gruppo.”

⁵ Sergio Bianchi is the ‘real’ name of an activist within “autonomia” coming from a working class background in the Milanese inter-land. After being charged with political crimes, he is sentenced to four years of special prison. As a hero and narrating I he is left unnamed – the reader can infer his name and historical identity by the inscription at the beginning of the novel. Balestrini met him in Paris where he fled in order to avoid judicial persecution.

ground between the author and the subject matter of the narration.

The denial of a common ground between his [Balestrini's] social and intellectual class on the one side and, on the other, [the novel's] obscure epic heroes bears several useful implications: in actuality, it acts as a defence, as a verdict of non-guilty on that class and it even allows the author to be evasive: the thoughts, choices and taste of that disinherited humanity do not meet with his or ours. An insurmountable difference separates us from them – only pity or sympathy can fill that gap in.⁶

Barilli and Giuliani's critiques are eloquent on the effect of estrangement created by the narrative of *Gli invisibili*. The author's 'voluntarist' and 'minimalist' adhesion to the point of view of the narrating 'I' has the effect of obscuring the wider political implications and historical possibilities of which the hero's personal experience is but a fragment. For instance, while striving to recall the occupation of the school, the hero acknowledges that his memory is failing him and that his account is both partial and confused:

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 have 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

⁶ "La negata comunanza tra il suo proprio ceto (sociale, intellettuale) e gli oscuri eroi dell'epopea ha vari risvolti utili: in fondo, costituisce una difesa, un verdetto di non colpevolezza, appunto su quel ceto, e perfino consente al suo estensore di non pronunciarsi fino in fondo: i pensieri, le scelte, i gusti di quel mondo di diseredati non coincidono con i suoi, o con i nostri, restiamo divisi da un distacco invalicabile, se non con le armi della piet , della commiserazione."

want to tell everything that happened during this time when so many different contradictory things of all kinds happened that to put them together and try to make sense of them seems to me quite impossible. (127)

Only a few paragraphs later the programme of the movement slips into the narrative as a succession of de-contextualized and scattered verbal fragments from propaganda leaflets (*ciclostilati*). Political rhetoric is treated as sedimentary verbal material that is exterior to the main character's subjectivity by means of a collage technique that signals the ideological erosion of the verbal fragments it manipulates:

to generalize the offensive means to radicalize disaffection with whichever hierarchy you choose to exercise our destructive creativity against the society of the spectacle to sabotage the machines and goods that sabotage our lives to promote indefinite wildcat general strikes always to have mass meetings in all the separate factories to elect delegates who can be recalled by the base to keep continuous links between all the places of struggle to overlook no useful technical means of free communication to give a direct use value to everything that has an exchange value to occupy permanently the factories and the public buildings to organize self-defence of the conquered territories and on with the music. (133)

The movement's programme is re-assembled as an irony producing device and the mordant sharpness of the finale deprives the political language of its meaning.⁷

The anonymous hero avows the impossibility of giving an ultimate historical sense to the facts he witnesses and in which he is involved. The aim of his narration "is just to speak

⁷ Cfr Lidia De Federicis, "Il selvatico sul cemento".

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, my italics). His only concern is to keep to his subjective point of view, the only one he recognizes as properly 'natural'. What the reader may perceive as the hero's failure to gain ideological insight over his actions fully corresponds, in fact, to the goal that he sets for himself as a narrator – to preserve his subjective experience as it is, to prevent it from being tarnished by other 'unnatural' modes of experience. His account is not as a single, progressive one-block story about his life but the raw succession of scattered memories of events, deprived of their causal order, their anti-teleological succession does not allow him to experience a perceivable psychological growth as a character. The time dimension framing the novel's disjointed and picture scattered-like rendition of the events has a circular pattern as the end – his self-defence in front of the judge in chapter forty-five – goes back to the beginning – the wait for his trial to start in chapter one. The body of the novel itself can thus be envisaged as the character's attempt to give evidence of his innocence on his own terms. The judge pronounces his verdict of guilty: "there is no culture in this story there are no ideas in these ravings that have neither rhyme nor reason there is only the preaching of ignorance and violence of total refusal of pure negation" (226) and the reader appears to be his only option of appeal.

Angelo Guglielmi has justly pointed out that *Gli Invisibili* draws its strength and its compellingly alienating force from the author's "impermeability". By impermeability, Guglielmi means Balestrini's consistently and rigorously carried out resistance against lending his narrative to an articulate and definitive understanding of the 1977 outbreak.⁸

⁸ "I believe that it is Balestrini's choice for an elementary and superficial reading and his impermeability against an articulate and complex understanding of the facts he tells us that allows him to write a novel of undoubted value using dangerous materials that are well kept off by other

The voice of the author as an historical and ideological awareness external to the character's consciousness is never detectable within the narration. The uncanny feeling of the author's absence is achieved by the novel's two major stylistic and formal devices: its graphic presentation and the construction of the hero's subjectivity. Graphically, the novel presents itself as the transcription of a monologue without punctuation marks. The signs of spoken language are frequent "*I swear to you* now it's some time ago *I swear to you* I was perfectly convinced they were killing everyone" (80, my italics). Presumably, their function is to signal the lack of authorial interpolation. The hero's subjectivity is constructed as entirely enclosed in the events he is narrating and re-enacting. Within his consciousness, the past keeps the intensity of the present because as a narrative subject, he is constructed by the non-linear succession of fractured events. The memories of his frantic activity within the movement are framed within the context of his incarceration as a political prisoner. The rendering of his experience is activated through the alternations of chapters about his past and his present. In the former, his life is exemplary as an exponent of the movement and in the latter, he is a political prisoner taking part in an insurrection. His recollections are forced to come to the narrative's fragmented surface by the compelling mechanism of a crystallised narrative pattern. They do not follow the subconscious mechanisms of the Proustian *memoire involontaire* because they do not arise spontaneously by

writers. I say dangerous because they are pregnant of implications that might distort any project of writing into propaganda. [Noi crediamo che sia proprio l'impermeabilità di Balestrini ad una comprensione articolata e complessa dei fatti che racconta e, per contro – la scelta di una lettura sommaria ed elementare – ciò che in qualche modo lo salva e gli consente di scrivere con materiali pericolosi (dai quali ogni altro scrittore si tiene lontano) un romanzo di certo pregio. Pericolosi perché densi di implicazioni al punto da storcere ogni progetto di scrittura e deviarlo verso esiti predicatori o propagandistici].”

quotidian acts nor do these events bear upon an artistic consciousness enjoying a transparent and unilinear vantage point collocated in the present.

The “impermeable” organization of the narrative’s factual record-like material offers no ground for the author’s ideological mediation of the past as it is lived through and perceived by the hero. As a novelist, Balestrini has been consciously working within the epic genre and also *Gli invisibili* is patterned on the epic genre.⁹ Its being contrived as an orally recounted story gives an allusive reference to the oral form of the early epic. The novel is structured on a rigorously modular pattern and every chapter is divided into strophes.

Bakhtin’s observation on the epic representation of time referring to the classical epic can shed some light on Balestrini’s authorial stance not to mediate the ‘time past’ enclosing the hero’s subjectivity within the ‘time present’ of the community of readers. According to Bakhtin,

[T]he authorial position immanent in the epic as a genre and constitutive for it (that is, the position of the one who utters the epic word) is the environment of a man speaking about a past that is to him inaccessible [...] Both the singer and the listener, immanent in the epic as

⁹ “My novels are ‘false novels’ – in fact they are epic poems that are pieced together according to metrical rules and although they are written in the form of prose the number of the strophes is carefully calculated [...] My characters are not endowed with the psychological depth and characterization typical of the novel. They are collective characters, like the leader of a battle. They are typical and representative of many other characters [...]. The aim is to represent conflicts and struggles also in a ‘heroicomic’ way. [I miei sono finti romanzi, sono poemi epici perché anche se non sono in versi sono tutti costruiti secondo la metrica e il numero di strofe è rigidamente calcolato [...]. I miei personaggi non hanno la caratterizzazione psicologica tipica della forma romanzesca. Sono dei personaggi collettivi, un po’ come il condottiero di una battaglia. Sono personaggi tipici, rappresentativi, come mille altri [...]. Lo scopo è quello di rappresentare degli scontri anche in maniera eroicomico.” Nanni Balestrini, my unpublished interview, August 2003.

a genre, are located in the same time and on the same evaluative (hierarchical) plane, but the represented world of the heroes stands on an utterly different and inaccessible time-and-value plane, separated by epic distance. (13-14)

By “epic distance” Bakhtin means the absolute ideological and temporal diversity separating the world in which both listener and author live from the epic world. It determines the contemporary’s impossibility to identify with the values and ideas of a world that is lost forever and that can only live in the sphere of memory as an unquestionably accepted representation of an alien past. This past cannot be probed or enquired on the ground of present, personally lived through experience. “In the world of memory, a phenomenon exists in its own peculiar context, with its own special rules, subject to conditions quite different from those we meet in the world we see with our own eyes, the world of practice and familiar contact.” (18) The function of the epic genre is to preserve the world of memory *as it is*. Paradoxically, it salvages from the listener’s oblivion long past deeds and events he or she has never witnessed. Balestrini’s working within the narrative possibilities opened up by the epic representation of memory takes on polemical connotations if confronted with his choice for the title of the novel. The hero deprived of name and identity, is the exemplary exponent of “gli invisibili” – the hundreds of members of the movement annihilated by the wave of repression that followed the escalation of terrorism. Mass arrests, guilt-by-association charges and imprisonment frequently without trial, had profound consequences for an entire generation whose sacrifice was forgotten because it was socially and politically unacknowledged.

The main character’s subjectivity lives in the realm of exceptional action together with the large multitude of *compagni* and fellow prisoners of which he is but an exemplary

representative. The fact that as a narrating 'I' he is left unnamed, is revealing of the exemplary role he assumes with regard to the movement's collectivity: as a hero, he exists only as a more or less stereotypical member of it. And so do his friends and *compagni* as the movement's young men and women are all named after undergrowth plants, medicinal or cooking herbs or vaguely exotic plants – Aiglio, China, Cocco, Gelso, Lauro, Malva, Menta, Valeriana, Ortica, Pepe, to name but a few.¹⁰ Each one of them is the part of an indissoluble continuum of vegetation drawing its strength and identity from their compact opposition against society at large. Indeed, their names suggest an unrelenting dichotomy between Nature and Society. Walt Whitman's image of a collective popular individual dramatized by the poet's epic song, *Leaves of Grass*, the cult-text of the Beat Generation, is also at work in *Gli invisibili* where it is invested with a biblical dimension. The characters' political and existential defeat echoes Moses's meditation on god's eternity and man's transitoriness in the Psalms 90, verses 5 and 6: "Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep:/ in the morning they are like grass which groweth up;/ In the evening it is cut down, and withereth".¹¹

In *Gli invisibili*, the prison hampers the epic's dialogic relationship between memory and oblivion by acting as an insurmountable physical and metaphorical barrier between the hero's memory and the oblivion of society outside of it. The hero's subjectivity lives in the realm of memory and exceptional action – as opposed to quotidian, familiar practice – together with a large multitude of friends and *compagni*. A cursory comparison with Natalia Ginzburg's *Caro Michele* – another

¹⁰ Garlic, China, Coconut, Mulberry, Bay, Mallow, Mint Valerian, Nettle, Pepper. Only Scilla stands out as a bulbous plant to symbolize the elusive nature of betrayal. The Police inspectors and policemen are named after predatory or supposedly ferocious animals: Donnola (Weasel), Lince (Lynx), Mastino (Mastiff).

¹¹ My thanks to Claudia Nocentini for this insight.

novel on the 'leaden years' – might be quite enlightening as for the corollary stemming from the representation of time peculiar to *Gli invisibili*. Ginzburg's epistolary novel revolves around Michele's self-exile in England after his involvement in the extreme left movements. The characters – Michele, his mother Adriana, friends and relatives – are all driven apart by a distance that is both ideological and physical. Nevertheless, Ginzburg's choice of the epistolary genre acts as a provocation against the perceived impossibility – on the part of the characters – to share a common comprehension of events, ideas and affections. Michele's partaking in the quotidian act of corresponding with a network of affections and familiar ties seems to frame – although not overcome – his alienation from 'bourgeois' lifestyle and ideas. The time unfolding in *Caro Michele* – the chronological order of the quotidian events recounted by the characters in their dated letters – is the time shared by a community that lives in the daily dimension: as a consequence, Michele's alienation from the contemporary reader's *Weltanschauung* seems to be diluted by token of his belonging to a community of affections made up of daily acts with which the reader can easily identify.

Caro Michele's world, "the world we see with our own eyes, the world of practice and familiar contact" – using Bakhtin's words – is poignantly absent from *Gli invisibili*: in the last chapter, after the verdict of guilty has been proclaimed despite his claim of innocence, the main character sticks his head in the water closet in a fit of despair in search of a listener that is forever absent outside of the prison, as if he were taken by the sudden awareness of being irrevocably cut off from social intercourse:

I pushed my head down but it wouldn't fit it wouldn't go through the hole to come out somewhere else to see out to see where I am where you are when we were a thousand ten thousand a hundred thousand it can't be

true that there's no one outside it can't be true that I feel
nothing any more that I no longer hear any voice any
sound any breath it can't be true that outside there is
only a vast cemetery where you are can you hear me I
can't hear I can't hear you I can't hear anything. (240)

His invisibility with regard to society outside of the prison is powerfully dramatized by the novel's representation of the spatial dimension. From this point of view, Balestrini's activity as a painter, since at least the late sixties, seems to have endowed him with a rare sensibility to the narrative use of the visual dimension. The *leitmotif* running through the novel is the hero's repetitive movement from down upward and then down again once he fails in his plea for innocence.¹² His narration starts from the dungeons under the tribunal: "The cellars are a maze of passageways lit every twenty or thirty yards by dusty fluorescent strip-lights" (1). He climbs up the stairs leading to the court room and sits on the highest seat waiting for the trial to start: "I sit down on the highest step of all and far beneath me I can see the lawyers with their black gowns thrown carelessly back on their shoulders" (3). Later on in the novel, he is arrested and brought to the police headquarters for interrogation: "we start going up these stairs [...] and we keep on climbing the stairs endless stairs and landings" (99). Here judge Lince does not believe his claim for innocence and sends him to the dungeon under the police headquarters, the same dungeons from which the narration starts: "they made me go back the same way I'd come down the narrow stairs but when we got to the ground floor we kept on going further and further down" (114). After

¹² Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* individuates in the 'down-up' dichotomy the representation of the spatial dimension characterizing the epic *genre* from its classical period up to the twentieth century. According to Frye, in order for the epic hero to attain his quest, it is necessary to descend to a lower world of the dead "to gain information about the future, or what is 'ahead' in terms of the lower cycle of life" (321).

spending the night in the unwholesome dampness of a dark cell, he finally gets out of the dungeon and sees the daylight again: "It was a lovely day and the weather was mild in the courtyard at the police headquarters" (122) but it is only a fleeting feeling of freedom as he is brought to another prison.

The dichotomy 'up' and 'down' reaches its apex in the scenes of the dramatic repression of the detainees' revolt. The vertical dimension assumes a vital role in the organization of the revolt as the prison is divided into several floors. The special police's crushing intervention comes from above and it is pre-announced by the helicopters' noise, "a truly deafening noise a noise coming from high above" (63). The police break in from the roof "There was a long moment of silence after these guys stopped throwing bombs down from the roof until they began climbing down the spiral staircase" (78). Once the revolt has been suppressed, the hero – like all the other prisoners – is forced to lie down with his face against the floor. From his dwarfed perspective, the policemen look like giants: "you could see these huge looming figures moving about for incidentally they were all huge very big and their bulk was exaggerated by those outfits maybe also exaggerated by this psychological situation you found yourself in with these huge great shoes [...] kicking everybody" (82). After the verdict of guilty has been proclaimed, the reader can presume that the hero will be either temporarily kept in the dungeon under the tribunal or sent straightaway back to prison. His invisibility, or forced subterranean disappearance, is tragically restated in the conclusive paragraph by the barren blankness of the nocturnal view from the sky of the prison that, although being lit in sign of protest with the detainees' *fiaccolata* (torchlight from the prison's windows), cannot be seen by the airplanes that "fly very high up there in the silent black sky and they see nothing" (242, last line).

The novel's *finale* envisages an apathetic society whose oblivious indifference towards the main character's personal account of the 'leaden years' is assuaged and rendered 'natural' by the image of the prison surrounded by the darkness of the night. His narration is looked upon from the insurmountably distant airplane's remote point of view closing up the novel. The prison's invisibility, and the hero's invisibility within it, acts as a provocative confirmation of the judge's verdict of guilty – his narration is reduced at the margins of collective memory by a more powerful master narrative made up of coercion and oblivion. As a narrator, he is caught within the State's grandiose display of means of repression and the silence of a society that is forever absent outside of the prison. Yet the image of the prison that is visually censured and swallowed up by the all-pervading darkness of the night, gives rise to an act of consciousness compelling the perceiver to question and reconceptualize both his or her point of view as a spectator and the delegitimization the main character's story constantly undergoes. It might be argued that Balestrini's plea for an 'impartial' reading of *Gli invisibili* as a text about the 'leaden years' is in fact based on his mythologizing of the hero as an innocent victim who undergoes an unjust condemnation in order not to betray his comrades and confess their actual involvement in the crime with which he is charged. Although not deprived of a certain cogency, such a reading has the drawback of dismissing the change in perspective imperiously brought about by the novel's *finale*. What seemed to be an exemplary tale of the 'leaden years' reveals itself to be a narration about the mechanisms that block those years' most controversial aspects out from collective memory – hence, the reader is caught in the dilemma of either making an attempt at rescuing the hero's narration from oblivion or letting it fall like a distant echo. For the reader to take part in the oblivious indifference of the listless society envisaged by the novel's *finale* and disregard the main character's story as unworthy of further reflection and investigation, is tantamount

to renouncing his or her agency as a producer of meaning and to looking deeper into a narration whose poverty of ideological and historical references demands illumination. Only the act of private reading – the author seems to suggest – can allow the ground for a loosening of the ideological ties and the tight relationship between the State and society that was called for by the emergency brought about by terrorism.

The account of the 'leaden years' fostered by *Gli invisibili* is very close in spirit to what, in Foucaultian terms, is defined as a 'Genealogy'.¹³ In *Gli invisibili* it is precisely the lack of any ideological-historical framework enclosing the pseudo random succession of the events that elicits the reader's response to work out the wider scenario to which the meaning of the narration is irrevocably, although elusively, anchored. A malicious corroding power, oblivion, is at work within the text of the novel by making reticent allusions to actual historical events and censoring their names and circumstances – the reader is left with only a vague awareness of its workings. For instance, of the many revolts during this period, the one whose events are most closely paralleled in the novel took place at Trani, near Bari, in December 1980 (Heron). The radio set up by the hero and his friends is to be framed within the scenario of the unprecedented democratic flourishing of alternative voices that was allowed by the law on the liberalization of the radio broadcasting,¹⁴ and its silence echoes the censorship the voices

¹³ Foucault's 'Genealogy' is a methodology that puts into question the present and its commonly accepted attitude towards the past by refusing to endorse an historical account with a global meaning – and thus an orthodox intellectual interpretation – the perceiver can easily share and identify with. Historical phenomena are depicted in their irreducible singularity as distinct and casual events that do not point towards a teleological resolution. On this see Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', and *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*.

¹⁴ For the politico-legal aspects of the 'liberalisation of the waves' see David Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era*, pp. 142-45.

of the counterculture underwent starting from the early months of 1977.¹⁵

The awareness of this oblivion implies awareness of the necessity of remembering, the imagination becomes more objective and the mind even more questioning. As Jean Starobinski has written, “[I]t is well known that historians have found their vocations while contemplating ruins” (180) in the attempt to master oblivion and ineffectual reminiscence. From this point of view, it is poignant that Robert Lumley’s thorough enquiry into the ideology and history of the movement begins with a quotation of the final paragraph from Balestrini’s *Gli invisibili* as if his investigation were the natural and ideal continuation of his reading of the novel.

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¹⁵ The story of Radio Alice can serve as an example. Radio Alice was set up by the bolognese ‘collettivo A/traverso’. In March 1977 the police smashed the radio’s technical equipment as an act of censorship. For a more specific point of view on the movement’s exploitation of the means of mass communication see Klemens Gruber, *L’avanguardia inaudita*. The story of Radio Alice is also the base for Guido Chiesa’s film *Lavorare lentamente* (2003).

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