

Benni's Tristalia

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Prolegomena

Stefano Benni (1947, Bologna) is without any doubt one of the best contemporary Italian writers. However, surprisingly little research has been undertaken on his literary prose. Ever since his debut critics seem to resort to the definition of the “caso letterario”, mainly for his linguistic qualities, his inimitable, effervescent, and light-footed style. His literary prose can not be seen as separate from his theatre, his poetry, his journalistic contributions (i.e. columns), his work as a director and script-writer (cf. bibliography and website). His entire oeuvre shows the same commitment towards society. Indeed, through his protagonists, rebellious and non-conformist youngsters, Benni never stops criticising today's wheeling-and-dealing, the consumer society and the socio-political herd instinct, of which Silvio Berlusconi seems to be the ultimate incarnation.

Benni might have inherited his criticism from the seventies, years which he witnessed at Bologna. Yet he claims that his criticism concerns a larger context:

Più che con Bologna credo di avere un rapporto ben
preciso con l'Italia e con quello che è successo in
Italia. (Degli Esposti 104)

This particular relationship with Italy becomes very clear in *Saltatempo* (2001), Benni's penultimate novel. It is the story of the young Saltatempo who has a special gift. Thanks to his “orobilogio” he seems to be able to live according to two

rhythms which allows him to travel in time, into the past as well as into the future. Through flashbacks and previews *Saltatempo* will thus portray the Italian twentieth century society by depicting its incongruities and difficulties (socio-economic and political problems, strikes, corruption, racism, natural disasters caused by man, upcoming capitalism and mass media) and he will also witness – in a non chronological order – the major events of the twentieth century, such as the student protests in France and Italy and the struggle of the working class. At the same time he will try to come to terms with himself. *Saltatempo*'s ability to travel into time is obviously a narratological strategy that allows Benni to cover the history of last century, but in combination with the choice of a young protagonist – his openness relates *Saltatempo* to the main characters of Benni's other novels – it enables the author to propose a detached though committed perspective.

Given these premises, we aim to analyse the narrator's perspective – which can probably be situated between utopia and dystopia – in order to determine Benni's commitment to society, i.e. the exact role of the writer-intellectual Benni within Italy. Therefore, within the framework of the Conference, we will study the impact of the seventies on his narrative, i.e. the explicit and implicit presence of ideas from the seventies and the following decades, explicit and implicit references to the political and sociological context, and links with political and ideological movements (starting with the seventies until now).

In doing so we will deal with the evolution of utopian and dystopian elements over time, the specificity of the main characters and Benni's typical style and hybrid language.

Referring to the past: The real revolutions

Our reading of Benni's prose in search of explicit references to the political and sociological context, revealed, paradoxically, that there are few of them. Moreover, they seem to be all concentrated in the one, rather recent novel we already referred

to: *Saltatempo* (2001); his debut, a collection of short stories, dates from 1976.

In *Saltatempo*, most references are extremely punctual: such as the one to feminism (105) and the sexual liberation (116); or the hippie culture ('Make love not war' 99-100). The protagonist, also mentions the 1969 Piazza Fontana Bomb Explosion (241) and the shooting in the legs of industrialists, the so-called 'tools of imperialism' (259), but does not seem to be bothered with it. Apparently the harsh cold on that 12th December affects Saltatempo more than the Piazza Fontana Bomb explosion. More attention is paid to the student strike and the following Revolution of May 1968 (178; 184*sqq.*; 227), and the occupation of the schools in Italy in the early seventies (187*sqq.*), but still even those revolutions are not at the centre of the narrative. During his stay in Paris, for example, Saltatempo misses all of the action because of his infatuation with Françoise, a girl he has just met, which ties them to her room; during the occupation of his school Saltatempo gets enchanted by another girl with whom he will share a sleeping bag in the occupied school building. Therefore, in spite of his being present he does not witness the events directly but will later present the testimonies of others as his own.

Thus, the references to these major events seem to constitute a mere historical background for the coming of age of the teenager Saltatempo upon which the novel focuses: his search for his own identity, his on-and-off-relationship with Selene, a girl he grew up with, his erotic fantasies. It reminds us the slightly older Ulisse, the main character of *Achille piè veloce* (2003), whose life turns around Pilar, a Spanish girl he is madly in love with. Just as *Saltatempo*, the novel merely alludes to the two political wings in Italy and focuses on the rightist one, and besides that on racism, corruption, the untenable situation of illegal immigrants and the precarious economy of the consumer society.

As for the time setting, *Achille piè veloce* draws closer to the present, but centres on the editorial world and the writing process, the topics that are related to the coming of age of Ulisse. *Saltatempo* remains the novel closest to historical reality – it covers almost the entire twentieth century narrated through the eyes of Saltatempo and the stories of others, particularly of his father who was directly involved in the strikes, the struggles that the working classes had to go through. That is why Saltatempo's father tries to pass the ideas of communism on to his son, but in vain.

Finally, we ought to observe that in spite of its secondary, almost irrelevant role, the historical framework does capture the (adult) reader's attention: the lively Paris "becomes a book" (cf. Benni 180). We are even inclined to say that the background is – indeed – the stronger part of the story.

Other revolutions & their leaders

Whereas *Saltatempo* and to a lesser extent *Achille piè veloce* remind the reader of the major (ideological) revolutions of the twentieth century as a footnote to the growing pains of the teenage protagonists and their impossible loves, Benni's other fiction incorporates fictitious revolutions involving younger characters, mainly children. However, "revolution" might not be the proper term, rebellion is probably more adequate, more specifically, an unexpected uprising against a totalitarian or dictatorial regime.

In command of the rebellious group (an underground movement) is a young child, a task the child – it is always a boy –¹ did not ask for and which he unwillingly accepts. His height is inversely proportional to the task but the boy will always

¹ Indeed, in Benni's work until 2003, there is not a single female protagonist, only strong-willed helpers (as defined in Greimas' actantial scheme). Note that the mother figure is absent, or, if present, of no importance.

manage to fulfill it because he possesses a particular gift: a high IQ (Elianto in *Elianto*), for example, or incredible powers (Salvo in *Spiriti*) which on the other hand make the boy(s) also vulnerable. The opponents would like to eliminate him – and they will make many attempts to do so that the boy has to hide away.

Even before his hiding away, within society, the protagonist has a marginalized position and has no future: the fragile Elianto is confined to a hospital, Salvo is an orphan and has received an alternative education from his grandmother, but has no home to go to; both risk to die by disease or the system (that does not tolerate their existence); their cunning will help them to escape.

Elianto, Salvo and their equals do not stand alone. They are assisted by numerous helpers that can be divided into three groups:

1. the (Homeric) Nestor figure: is the elderly person who becomes the spiritual guide of the young protagonist although at first sight he looks rather eccentric and behaves rather strangely; the obscure trader Poros, for example, is to the young Salvo (*Spiriti*) what the philosophizing and countercultural (male) nurse Talete is to Elianto (*Elianto*); notice that the two characters, i.e. mentor and pupil, are very often separated and that they get to know each other precisely because of the mission – their meeting seems casual but has been planned by the mentor;
2. the friends of the young boy on the other hand do accompany him on his mission; the friends are members either of music group/band (*Elianto*)² or of a sport team

² Music is a very important aspect of Benni's fiction. It is obviously personified by musicians, singers (in *Spiriti* we have a reference to the performance of the "three tenori"), but in the texts (fragments of the) lyrics of songs are disseminated. These offer the reader a synopsis of the story and

(*Comici spaventati guerrieri*, 1986, *Compagnia dei celestini*, 1992); they are as audacious as the protagonist but less gifted; they also belong to an underground movement or counterculture;

3. finally, the protagonist is assisted by a variety of fantastic characters: ghostlike creatures that can make themselves invisible and assume another (humanlike) form, namely the spirits as in *Spiriti*, among which the sensuous Melinda or her sister Zelda; seduction is not their only strategy, some of them are masters in the martial arts, such as, for instance, the Kung Fu warriors and minifighters in *Elianto*.

Often, there's an overlap of the categories and their characteristics. Poros, for example, is not only a Nestor, he is also a "spirit". Besides, it is not clear from the beginning that he is on Salvo's side. His ambiguity is related to his changeable nature.

Fantascienza

The presence of the last group of helpers perfectly suits the particular setting of the novels. The stories of *Elianto*, *Spiriti*, *Comici spaventati guerrieri* and *La compagnia dei Celestini* take place in a science fiction-like world. The most extreme example can be found in *Elianto* that in fact contains seven worlds, going from "Protoplas", the primary world, over "Bludus", the world of games, to Mnemonia, the world of memories (or oblivion) – there is a map at the beginning and the end of the novel. The seven worlds could be considered as a universe with its own cosmology described in the "Prologo" that is in fact a comic rewriting of the Big Bang Theory (Benni 1996 13sqg.). Creatures are not bound to rules of gravity and can fly or, as already told, travel in time: *Elianto* just needs the

form a call for action for the characters. Moreover, they increase the rhythm of the books and contribute to the parodic level of the stories.

reflection of a map on the room wall to let him out of the hospital; characters can even intrude in each other's dreams.

Actually in the extravagant setting, a clear transgression of the verisimilitude, the reader recognises an enlargement of the world he is living in. Every exaggeration deriving from a blow-up has its key.

Let's give away a few easy ones.

(1) In *Elianto* the presentation of the twenty presidents and their respective party in arbitrary order ("in ordine sparso", 43) on the eve of the battle of ideas recall political parties, politicians, VIPs, and the cover-up operations from the eighties and nineties:

Mathausen Filini, del PNC (Partito Nazi-Chic), aveva scelto una bellissima divisa del Reich con berretto da skipper. [...]

Il generale Zeta, del PLSS (Partito Logge, Sette e Servizi Segreti), sarebbe venuto travestito da sua moglie, e vice versa. [...]

Previtali, del RFDS (Ricchi Fatti da Soli), sarebbe venuto vestito da imperatore romano, su una biga catalitica. [...]

Zeroli, del CCC (Centro Centrista Calibrato), aveva scelto un sobrio abito grigio con una cravatta a bersaglieri.

Ospitale, del FIN (Fuori i Negri), avrebbe indossato il costume tipico della sua valle, camicia bianca, braghe corte corte di cuoio e cintura di coglioni di stambecco.

Natassia Fodera, dell'AS (Alleanza Stilisti), avrebbe fatto una clamorosa entrata con una gonna di velluto nero larga diciotto metri, sospinta all'interno da quattro inservienti su altrettanti go-kart, e avrebbe portato in testa un colbacco di visioni vivi saldati con il bostik. (43-45)

(2) In *Spiriti* (2000) the president of the United States shares with Bill Clinton the love for apprentices, but the fictitious president is much more a puppet of his staff (almost each staff member seems to have more power than he does). Although he does not play (the) sax, he is also an amateur (music) player. His dog is called Baywatch, a so-called “Labrador Water Ranger” (39) – it will turn out he is another spirit, just as the enchanting apprentice Melinda. “Juicy detail”: Baywatch will get the company of two other dogs, the ones that mysteriously disappeared from the Velázquez painting, *Las meniñas* – Benni is clearly playing with the levels of the story.

The president’s Italian colleague Berlanga, “sua innocenza l’onorevole Berlanga” (103), is a copy of the real “Cavaliere”: “anomala gloria di Usitalia, uomo predestinato all’eutanasia del paese” (103).

For today’s reader the keys seem to lie in the present, and to a certain extent they do – the presidents in *Spiriti* are indeed clownish copies of their real counterparts, but in the earlier texts the reader encounters characters and situations that anticipated what happened later (but not that much later) in Italy, alias Usitalia (*Spiriti*), Tristalia with the capital Megalopoli (*Elianto*), Gladonia (*La compagnia dei celestini*). These earlier texts give a prospect of the future that has already become our present. The perspective is not (yet) historical, but visionary (and broader than the historical one because it is more widely applicable).

Benni announced the consumer-centered society that was imposed on its citizens under the pretext of progress:³ it is the “prezioso tempo di Creatori del Presente, e [...] Grandi Appuntamenti, Fusioni di Imperi, Affari Colossali, Leasing e Truffe li attendevano” (Benni, *La compagnia dei celestini* 131). Citizens are indeed pushed to consume as much as possible by means of the media and social control. “Siate maggioranza!” is the slogan (and title of chapter 4) presented on the television in *Elianto* that invites the audience to vote for what the majority would vote for (if not, electricity will be cut off for a while – which happens to Elianto’s family). Having a deviant opinion is no longer acceptable and implies exclusion as a punishment. There is only room for mainstream and levelling out in the age of videocracy. In other words: “Big brother is watching you” – “Siate maggioranza” is the mere translation of George Orwell’s “Think majority” in *1984* (cf. Jones 239).

“[B]asta qualche televisione a rincoglionire tutti”, says the (arms) merchant Hacarus in *Spiriti* (Benni 27). That explains why “[l]a gente si indegna di più per un rigore non concesso che per un delitto non risolto” (49). Television is mind control by the system (regime). The many sport events and quizzes are exemplary of that control. The infotainment affects also the news programmes that are thoroughly manipulated, superficial and smooth messages. The overwhelming influence of the medium television is most developed in *Elianto* and *L’ultima lacrima*. In *Elianto* Fido PassPass recalls Emilio Fede, the anchorman of Rete4, the channel of “His Emittenza” Berlusconi (Jones 127) and on the cover of *L’ultima lacrima* we see a family watching television; *L’ultima lacrima* opens with the story of that same family watching the execution of the father in

³ See the presentation of the so-called “Reame del Progresso” in *Comici spaventati guerrieri* (1989: 14-15).

a life transmission – the father, as well as his relatives, is pleased with his one day of fame.

The pushed mass media of Benni's fictitious worlds enables and at the same time justifies the conflict of interests of the leaders who control in an obscure way both economy and politics or ideology in a globalising world.⁴ In that respect fiction equals reality:

L'Italia è un Paese dove poche persone possono decidere, e di nascosto. Dove non si può cambiare quasi niente. Un'oligarchia regolata dai partiti, dalla mafia e dalla grande economia. (Loredan51)

And, as in real life, there is just this small rebellious nucleus, an opposition that succeeds in its mission yet fails to overthrow the system (in spite of the success of the mission which apparently only leads to of the survival of the opposition).

Benni's fiction can therefore be qualified as highly dystopian. It is the story of a near future, of an imminent danger-disaster (cf. Jameson), that of society being swallowed up by consumerism and political opportunism (incarnated, for instance, by the character Biszenyski in Benni's *L'ultima lacrima* 207). A disaster that within the story is seen as utopian except by the rebellious group.

Unlike the literary utopia, the dystopia does not present a "what if", a construct of something new. In other words it does not offer an epistemologic tool; on the contrary, the dystopia unveils the intrinsic nature of society not an alternative nor the end of the current ideology-era (Jameson). However, the dystopia does allow the presence of some utopian elements – the possibility of an ideological change or rupture – that are more

⁴ For an analysis of the globalisation and the new economy see the columns collected in *Dottor Niù. Corsivi diabolici per tragedie evitabili* (2001).

diversified in *Saltatempo* and *Achille*. At crucial moments the narrator presents some alternatives, called “possibilities” or “scenarios”, which adds an extra metatextual dimension to these two novels. Still, even the latest novels reflect Benni’s pessimistic view on today’s society (cf. *La Porta*). Nevertheless, because of his style Benni’s fiction never becomes unbearably “heavy” or sombre.

Hybrid

Benni’s writing process results in the composition of a highly constructed text. During the analysis we already broached the parodist tendency on an onomastic level. First, the name changes are derived from the blow up-effect: Mussolardi, Berlangar... Other names are clearly intertextual: just think of Baywatch, Talete, Avis Presley (*Spiriti*), Edgar Allan Disney (*La compagnia* 191). Both strategies have a grotesque effect. “Sono uno scrittore, un romanziere con una forte inclinazione al linguaggio fantastico e umoristico” (Degli Esposti 100). And therefore “E ci tengo a scegliere bene i nomi, in un libro ogni parola è preziosa”, Benni confesses in an interview (Poli).

The intertextuality in Benni consists also largely of a tendency of rewriting⁵ of both high and low literature and culture, combining epic, picaresque elements or fragments with bits of reality tv. The “uso spregiudicato e divertito dei generi, semplicità comunicativa popolare e pessimismo apocalittico da élite, curiosità-disgusto per il presente e continue, funamboliche fughe dell’immaginazione” (*La Porta* 187) connects Benni to writers as Pynchon and Vonnegut.

Next to that the reader will find pseudo-quotations which complicate the anchorage of the text(s).

⁵ Particularly interesting in this respect is *Achille piè veloce*. The editor Ulisse carries along manuscripts of aspirant writers reminiscent of existing texts.

On the other hand this shows the high degree of contamination (“contaminatio”) on a linguistic level: words are being contracted “fidipà” (Benni, *La compagnia*) or attached to one another (“dissUlisse” Benni *Achille* 22, 27, 100, 122); dialects, regional variants and registers are mingled; on some occasions Benni invents a language of its own; he often resorts to foreign languages, such as French, Latin and – mainly – English, in an incorrect or eventually comic transcription (“Lesgò!” Benni *Comici* 144).

The multilinguism aims for that matter to render the complexity of our reality, its multiracial and multimedial dimensions:

ma l’aspetto formale della complessità dei linguaggi, cioè un tipo di scrittura che non si deprime davanti alla complessità, davanti al fatto che stiamo diventando una società multirazziale o multimediale, bene, questo aspetto del postmoderno, cioè della confusione dei linguaggi, della nascita di un linguaggio nuovo di comunicazione che comprende lingue diverse, dialetti diversi, e lingue meticce, mi interessa molto. (Degli Esposti 104)

This excerpt from an interview with Benni is obviously an ideological statement but it also shows the writing process of the author.

The textual polyphony and code-switching (Degli Esposti 99) – the narrator repeats a word in various languages (“shopping center i quali, lesquells, which [...]” Benni *Achille* 19) – result in an accelerating and sometimes exhilarating rhythm of the text, which could be called the

elemento *espressionista* che, pure in un pieno recupero del romanzesco, infiamma e movimenta la sua scrittura. Il procedimento stilistico è l’enumerazione, presente in quasi ogni pagina (tassonomie, elenchi, decaloghi) [...] Elenchi lunghissimi, eccessivi,

fantasiosi, come per abbracciare l'intera realtà (che scappa da tutte le parti) e che hanno soprattutto un valore musicale, nel senso cioè di dare alla pagina una cadenza ritmica marcata, non scoppiettante ma direi tenace, ipnotica, come un rap metropolitano (La Porta 185).

Within the lists particular attention should be paid to the lemmatic excerpts (such as the definitions of the non-familiar, fantastic creatures, as the KOFS, the memory eating device, in *Elianto*, 101).

The combination of lists and repetitions – the *repetitio* inscribes itself at various textual levels – creates a circular effect: at a macrotextual level, for instance, the incipit and explicit entangle, which brings us back to the content.

Transgression

Needless to say that Benni's fiction responds to Italo Calvino's definition of "lightness" as proposed in *The Norton Lectures (Lezioni americane. Six Memos For the Next Millennium)*, but in Benni that same lightness meets the weight of being in this world: humour and surrealism meet criticism in a hyperrealistic world. In other words: "Non credo che nessuno scrittore riesca mai ad allontanarsi dal suo tempo" (Degli Esposti 103).

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