

The Historian, the Poet, and the Semiologist: Perspectives on the Post 68 Decade

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It is May 1968. The barricades go up in the Latin quarter of Paris as students occupy the Sorbonne. Students and workers march in their hundreds of thousands. The biggest general strike in history is called. General De Gaulle, the president of the Republic, flies to a French military garrison in Germany. For two months Paris wins back its reputation as the centre of European revolutions.

Our poet is in Paris at the time. Or does he go there in order to find out what is happening? Anyway, he telephones back to Italy to report. He reads out the transcriptions he's been making of the words, phrases and slogans that cover the walls around the university, in posters, in graffiti. In the Tartaruga gallery in Rome the gallerist Plinio De Martiis has organized a rolling exhibition called *Teatro delle mostre* (Theatre of Exhibitions): young artists are each given complete control of the space for one day in which they can do whatever they like. That day De Martiis and the artists transcribe the words and phrases read out by the poet in Paris directly onto the walls of the gallery.

It is May 1968. She is in Dar es Salaam living in the old quarter on the Morogor Road. She is not yet a historian or does not think of herself as such. When she left Italy, she thought that she would not return. She had graduated. She had sold off her collection of Science Fiction and all her furniture. With her *compagno* she went in search of adventure and revolution in Africa. In 1968 she is working with FRELIMO –Frente de Libertação de Mozambique – the liberation movement that was

fighting Portuguese imperialism in Africa. A knowledge of languages makes her useful as a translator and interpreter.

As for our semiologist, I'm not sure exactly where he is when the May-June events are being played out in Paris. But I picture him at the university in Bologna. The events in France don't entirely come as a surprise to him. The university in Turin had already been occupied in November-December the previous year, and in January some 36 universities in Italy were under occupation, including his own. He will have spoken with his friend the poet about developments. They had both been active members of the experimental Gruppo 63 and the poet was now editing a new review, *Quindici*, to which he contributes.

Many readers will already have guessed the identity of the semiologist – Umberto Eco.

The poet is, of course, Nanni Balestrini. The historian is Luisa Passerini.

I have chosen these three figures as I believe that they can offer vantage-points from which to look again at the decade of the 1970s. I say "look again" deliberately as their publications also have a bearing on my own work on the period, notably *States of Emergency. Cultures of Revolt in Italy 1968 to 1978*. For me this conference has given me a welcome opportunity to revisit and perhaps revise earlier ideas and concerns.

Balestrini, Passerini, Eco. Why them?

Firstly, they are intellectuals 'on' or 'of' the left who actively engaged, in their different ways, with the politics of post 1968 Italy – politics, that is, in its widest sense. They are, in this respect, part of the longer story of *impegno* discussed by Jennifer Burns in her study *Fragments of Impegno. Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative* (2001). Their writings in the 1970s – articles, poems,

books, pamphlets – deal either directly or indirectly with contemporary events and debates.

Secondly, Balestrini, Passerini and Eco have written retrospectively about the experiences of ‘before’ and ‘after’ 1968. They have analysed and interpreted these experiences *against the grain* of how they were being represented in the mass media in the 1980s, a decade that saw the celebration of values and ideas that were the antithesis of those of the 1970s.

Thirdly, the writings of these three figures are significant not just for *what* they are trying to say but for *how* they are trying to say it. They adopt interesting strategies in relation to form and genre that traverse and subvert traditional boundaries. The historian borrows devices more often associated with fiction. The semiologist writes novels. The poet turns historian.

What I want to do here is to identify some key texts that are simultaneously *about* the politics of post 1968 Italy and *about* the process of writing about that politics. In this sense, the texts are also meta-texts. In part, the approach delimits an area for analysis in terms of period and place – namely, the post 1968 decade seen from the 1980s and the Italian context. I hope, however, that the paper will also raise questions that go beyond this framework – questions about memory, literary and other genres, politics.

Nanni Balestrini and *L'editore*

When Nanni Balestrini ‘exhibited’ his *I muri della Sorbonna* at the Tartaruga gallery in 1968 he was linking the literary avant-garde and the emergent political contestation (Calvesi 1968). The writings were so many ‘found words’. Nothing was invented. There was no individual authorship or creativity. No signatures. No authentication. His work was a copy. As an artist-poet, Balestrini was making a verbal *assemblage*, putting together what he had found and making it strange by transposing the writing from one context (the walls of Paris) to another (a gallery in Rome). But the action could also be read as political.

He was spreading the word, carrying out propaganda: “POPULARIZE THE STRUGGLES OF THE DIVINE MARQUIS”, “POWER TO THE IMAGINATION”, “IT IS PROHIBITED TO PROHIBIT”, “LEAVE FEAR OF THE REDS TO ANIMALS WITH HORNS”. In fact, the show marks a turning point in Balestrini’s work in this respect.

In the early and mid 1960s Balestrini combines texts drawn from every kind of source. His *Cronogrammi*, for example, consists of words and sentences cut out from newspapers in their original typology and turned in collages (Balestrini 1963). His *Tristano* (1966) is described in the book’s blurb as “un romanzo senza trama e personaggi, il suo stile è, se così si può dire, il ‘non stile’: il livellamento anonimo del linguaggio derivato da un cumulo di materiali stilistici ‘prefabbricati’: stile dei romanzi rosa, stile dei libri di geografia [...] come se spezzoni di molti film fossero stati capriciosamente mischiati”.¹

Balestrini’s method of working is described by fellow poets as Dadaist in the manner of Kurt Schwitters’s collages or non-sense in the manner of *Alice in Wonderland*.

After 1968, however, Balestrini increasingly uses politics and political discourse as the raw material for his work. He also makes greater use of formats that can be seen as more accessible to a wider public, a public constituted in good part by those involved in or close to the social movements of the time. Not that he stops writing poetry. Not that he accepts the distinction between the poetry and the ‘novels’ that he writes. But the novels are the privileged vehicle for the political. They can be grouped into those produced at the time of the events described or shortly afterwards – *Vogliamo tutto* is

¹ “a novel without a plot or characters, his style is, if it is possible to say such a thing, a non-style: an anonymous levelling of the language derived from Mills and Boon women’s fiction, geography textbooks [...] as if they were segments of film capriciously mixed up.” Translations are by author unless otherwise indicated.

published by Feltrinelli in 1971; *La violenza illustrata* by Einaudi in 1976; and those written after a greater gap in time: *Gli invisibili* and *L'editore*, published by Bompiani in 1987 and 1989 respectively. Balestrini's linguistic experimentation, however, runs through all the work. In *La violenza illustrata*, for instance, a press report of a demonstration is broken up: a sentence breaks off in the middle and then runs on a few lines later; words fracture and fragment. Sometimes Balestrini freezes scenes of violence as Andy Warhol does with his silk screen prints of road accidents, suicides and electric chairs. Sometimes he goes in the opposite direction, recreating in language the sensations of confusion, pain, anger and loss of the political demonstrator.

Vogliamo tutto is the best known of the *romanzi*. Set in the Hot Autumn of 1969 when strikes, sabotage and demonstrations paralyzed the Fiat motor company and the city of Turin, when workers shouted the slogan "vogliamo tutto". The *io narrante*, the first person narrator, is a Southern factory worker. Much of the text was directly derived by Balestrini from tape-recordings with a militant young worker that he had got to know. The collective voice and the language that mixed political jargon with a popular vernacular would have been instantly recognizable to contemporaries. At the same time, the structure of *Vogliamo tutto* with its short episodic chapters and paragraphs and its *andatura strofica* was described by a critic at the time as evoking the *chanson de geste*, particularly the *Chanson de Roland* (Spinella 8). Except that that book celebrates the epic feats of the proletarian not those of the knight. The great battle at the end is the battle fought on 3 July 1969 between police and demonstrating workers and students in corso Traiano. The demonstrators are trying to march to the city centre and the police are blocking their path. The ending is inconclusive. Balestrini's choice of date is not incidental. Industrial action has reached its extreme limits and turned into

open revolt against ‘everything’ – against the factory, against the police, against capitalism. Had he chosen a later date, the scenario would already have been very different. On 12 December 1969 a bomb explosion in Piazza Fontana in Milan was to kill 16 people and create the conditions for the growth of the politics of terror that would dominate the following decade.

Much of the debate about terrorism *in* and *through* the literature of the 1970s has focused on the murder of Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades on 9 May 1978. Marco Belpoliti in *Settanta* provides a fine analysis and reconstruction of the responses to the murder on the part of a number of writers, from Sciascia and Calvino to Arbasino, Morante and Eco. Balestrini, however, is not mentioned. Yet of all the writers of the period his engagement with the politics of violence and contestation was perhaps the most enduring and intransigent. Balestrini’s own contribution in fiction dealt not with Moro and the climax of Red Brigade action, but with the death of Giangiacomo Feltrinelli and the origins of the armed struggle in Italy. The novel *L’editore*, in which the title refers to Feltrinelli without naming him, is especially interesting for my purposes because it deals both with the process of reconstructing the events surrounding the mysterious death *and* attempts that reconstruction. At stake is the truth of what actually happened, the politics of memory, and the impossibility of producing a copy of reality. The blurb (quite possibly written by Balestrini himself) describes the book:

Durante un week-end in montagna un giovane regista, un libraio, un professore d’università e un giornalista discutono la possibile trama di un film ambientato nei giorni successivi al ritrovamento di un corpo dilaniato sotto un traliccio alla periferia di Milano, e al suo clamoroso riconoscimento come quello del famoso editore. Diciassette anni prima i quattro amici, tutti impegnati nel movimento, avevano vissuto insieme

quei giorni, di cui rievocano ora le tensioni, le discussioni, gli scontri.²

L'editore is a work of fiction. The week end is imagined. Balestrini deploys devices familiar to us from earlier works – as in *Gli invisibili*, the text is stripped of punctuation; as in *Tristano* or *La violenza illustrata*, chunks of text are taken wholesale from other sources, including Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*. A meditated choice. *Under the Volcano* was one of the books published by the *editore*. Its structure, furthermore, is echoed by Balestrini's text – the bringing together of the paths/lives of the characters in the events of one day, the circularity and seeming repetition that departs from linear narration, the atmosphere of political intrigue and menace. *L'editore*, however, is also a *roman a clé*. The real life equivalents of the characters are scarcely disguised. Balestrini showed the final manuscript to the Feltrinelli family before sending it to Bompiani for publication. *Senior Service*, the book written by Giangiacomo's son Carlo Feltrinelli, contains a historical reconstruction of the publisher's family background and life that authenticates the accuracy of most of the details found in Balestrini's work. *L'editore* is a literary work but its readers can quickly relate its discussions and concerns to those of a milieu – the left, especially the extreme left – and of a moment – the revisiting of the post 1968 decade in the light of the twentieth anniversary of '68. Balestrini also produced two publications that are more explicitly part of that political debate. There is his article in *Alfabeta* entitled “Anche un processo agli

² “During a week-end in the mountains, a young film-maker, a bookseller, a university lecturer, and a journalist discuss possible plots for a film set in the days immediately following the discovery of the body at the foot of the electricity pylon on the outskirts of Milan and the dramatic recognition that it was that of the famous publisher (*l'editore*). Seventeen years earlier the four friends, all of them active in the political movements, had lived through those days of which they now recall the tension, the discussions, the conflicts”.

intellettuale”(1983) in which he argues that a systematic attempt has been made in Italy to criminalize all forms of opposition associated with the movements from 1968 to 1977. Then, there is the book co-authored with Primo Moroni called *L'orda d'oro. 1968-1977 La grande ondata rivoluzionaria e creativa, politica ed esistenziale*. Here Balestrini (and Moroni) make clear that the Red Brigades and other armed formations *were* part of the left and not the invention of the secret services, Italian, American or Soviet. That, of course, does not mean that everyone else in any way associated with them is aiding and abetting their activities. On the contrary, the utmost clarity and honesty are called for in the face of so much falsification in Italian politics.

L'editore differs, however, from Balestrini's earlier novels on at least two counts. Firstly, the salience given to the reflexive mode. This functions at a number of levels. Take the character of the *editore*. We know him only through the refracted and fragmented pictures of him in the recollections of the friends and in their proposed scenarios for the film about him. Take the *trama* or plot. Or rather the plots, plural, because there is the mystery as to whether the *editore* was killed as the result of a plot, there is the plot of the film that the characters are planning, and, lastly, the plot of Balestrini's book. It is not always clear to the reader where she or he is in relation to these Chinese boxes. It is only when we reach “scene Two” that we realize that “scene One” was a hypothetical scene for the film. The reader has to be continuously alert to the way first person narration is assigned to different characters.

Secondly, in *L'editore* Balestrini focuses on an individual and on the existential rather than collective dimension of choices he faces. There is the *editore* seen by the press and the established left who is manipulated by dark forces or is play-acting according to a script written by Che Guevara. Then there is the *editore* seen by his friends for whom he may be confused and full of contradictions but for whom he is still a man who somehow pursues his ideas to their logical if tragic conclusion.

The book can be understood as restituting dignity to a person whose choices have been stripped of meaning and rationality. It is not that we get inside the head of the central character – Balestrini is consistent in his disavowal of notions of centred subjectivity and psychology drawn from the 19th century novel. Rather the form of the novel is designed to match the complexity and ultimate unknowability of what we call reality, not excluding the part played by blind chance. There is the ending-ending in which we are given a plausible reconstruction of the death as a possible scene “it might have happened like this”. Then there is the ending-without-an-ending suggested by another character: “forse ci siamo preoccupati troppo di trovare sempre delle spiegazioni e delle verità a tutti i costi e forse abbiamo perso di vista qualcosa di più importante forse invece le cose più importanti sono quelle che non sappiamo e quelle che non sapremo mai”.(155)³

Luisa Passerini and *Autoritratto di gruppo*

When Luisa Passerini returned to Italy in March 1969 after her time in Africa working with the liberation movements, she threw herself into left wing politics. Once her book on FRELIMO was out, she stopped working on Africa (Passerini 1970). Every day she went to the gates of Fiat Mirafiori, handed out leaflets and attended meetings. It was her introduction to '68, except that '68 proper was already a memory – the student movement had effectively dissolved itself into the general labour mobilization of the Hot Autumn. Between 1969 and the mid 1970s Passerini sees herself above all as political activist, firstly with Gruppo Gramsci, then with the women's movement. All of this is recounted in her book *Autoritratto di gruppo*.

³ “perhaps we have worried too much about always finding an explanation and truth at any cost and perhaps we've lost sight of something more important perhaps the most important things are the ones that we don't know and never will know”.

Autoritratto di gruppo was published by Giunti in 1988, about the same time as Balestrini's *Gli invisibili* and *L'editore*. Like them, it deals with the experience and memory of the movements of the 1970s. It too experiments with forms of narration. But Luisa Passerini thinks of herself as a historian, not as a writer of fiction. By the time she writes *Autoritratto di gruppo* she has published her *Torino operaia e il fascismo* (1984), later translated in English as *Fascism in Popular Memory* (1987). Passerini was closely involved with the History Workshop Collective that had its base among social historians in England but included historians across the rest of Europe (Passerini, Fridenson and Niethammer 1998). In fact, she played an important part in introducing new methodologies into Italy, especially those connected to oral history (Passerini 1978). After *Torino operaia e il fascismo* she took part in an international research project directed by Ronald Fraser that sought to study and compare the student movements of 1968. This resulted in a book: *1968. A Student Generation in Revolt* (1987). But it was a book that left Passerini profoundly dissatisfied. It was too much of an 'objective' reconstruction with little to say on subjectivity and the felt experience of the protagonists for all its use of oral testimony. So she decided to continue with the research on her own account. Concurrently, she began to work with feminist historians – the group around the review *Memoria. Rivista di storia delle donne* in Italy, and with women historians involved with *History Workshop Journal*, such as Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor. In 1987 *Memoria* published a special issue dedicated to "il movimento femminista negli anni '70" to which Luisa Passerini contributed a piece in the section "i percorsi", short autobiographical accounts of individual encounters with and involvement with feminism.

On the one hand, Passerini's historical writings have focused on Fascism – a later study that dealt with the figure of Mussolini called *Mussolini immaginario* (1991) – and on the

interwar years in Europe – her *Europe in Love. Love in Europe* (1999).

On the other, she has written as a historian on a more recent history of which she herself has been (and is) a protagonist – 1968, the women's movement.

Autoritratto di gruppo falls into this second category. But it is distinct from all her other studies for the way it experiments with writing history. As such, it is work of considerable courage that has exposed her to criticism from the profession of academic historians.

Autoritratto is constructed out of three parallel texts. The diary: January, February, March, April, June, October, December, December 25th, December 28th, and back to January, again January and through to December. Here the author speaks in the first person over the period of time in which the book is conceived and finally brought into the world. Meditations on the process of writing combine with reflections on Passerini's love affair with a man twenty years younger than her, on her fevers and dietary regime, her visits to the psychoanalyst, her dreams. She is at once analysand and analyst. A note at the end of the book tells us that the diary is a free re-working of a diary kept between 1983 and 1987.

The second text, *in italics*, consists of an autobiographical account starting with her birth and family and finishing in the early 1980s. It is a *percorso di vita* of the kind she contributed to the journal *Memoria*. In fact, Passerini has re-used interviews with her published in different reviews between 1974 and 1987.

The third text, which is assigned separate chapters (the even numbers), presents and analyses oral testimonies gathered in the 1980s by herself and others in research on 1968, on feminism, and, lastly, on political violence.

It is not hard to see why *Autoritratto di gruppo* should have been either ignored or dismissed by historians faithful to

models of objectivity and linear narration, dominant modes of history writing that Passerini criticizes in an article in *New Left Review*:

[The continuous narrative] that purports to establish and explain sequences of events in terms dominated by political and economic forces, while excluding aspects that matter a great deal to some of us – subjectivity or daily life, and ‘subaltern’ figures, such as women. (Passerini 137)

What Passerini attempts in *Autoritratto* is radical and destabilizing. She combines genres that are normally kept separate, relinquishes hierarchies of evidence and veracity (written as distinguished from oral sources, for example), and puts her own authority as authorial voice in question.

Subjectivity is at the centre of *Autoritratto*. It is explored both as the world of emotions and the unconscious and as that of rationally conceived political action. Yet the centrality of the subject as coherent actor or agent of history is subverted. Discontinuity and the gap between intended and actual outcomes is examined in 1968 as lived event and memory. But for Passerini, “discontinuity” is a concept and condition of existence that allows the historian to think about recurrence, the return of the repressed, rediscoveries and reappropriations – considerations excluded from a linear conception of time. Hence the cyclical character of her diary in *Autoritratto di gruppo*.

The ‘1968’ that emerges from *Autoritratto* is not “come eravamo”, how we were then, as in an objective reconstruction. Rather it is how ‘68 is understood in the present by protagonists, author included, in the light of everything that has happened subsequently. Passerini uses the simile of the prism: “sul piano culturale il ‘68 agisce come prisma: i raggi convergono su di esso e ne escono scomposti in vari colori. Quello che prima non era visibile ora lo diventa e nello stesso tempo nulla è più come prima.” (175)

Nor does Passerini avoid evaluative judgements. Her years in analysis lead her to a discovery of the importance of her relationship to her mother, a relationship overshadowed by the presence of her father as a role-model. This, in turn, or in conjunction with her historical work, makes her critical of the obsession in the political sphere with the father figure – both as example to be followed and as the authority to be negated. Furthermore, Passerini questions the prevalent notion of subjectivity in which it was assumed that one has total control over one's decisions. The 'dark side' of 1968 is something that Passerini confronts and confronts the reader with.

But who exactly is that reader? In the first instance, the readers can be generationally defined – those connected, in the widest sense, with the experiences of the 50 or so individuals interviewed about the events of 1968 and its aftermath.

But Passerini is also concerned with how memory is transmitted between generations. There is a citation from Raymond Queneau in the frontispiece that is indicative: "When you have a past. Yvonne, you will see what a strange thing it is". *Autoritratto di gruppo* begins as an inquiry into a generation that is rebelling against its fathers and mothers. It concludes with Passerini thinking about the process of aging and the transmission of memory.

Umberto Eco and the role of the writer

In 1968 Umberto Eco was 36. Older than the other two. Balestrini was 33, and Passerini 27. Unlike Balestrini, who was a founder member of Potere Operaio, or Passerini whose political involvement has already been mentioned, Eco had never joined the Communist Party as a young man and did not now choose to become an activist in an organization or movement. Instead, he is a sympathiser of their cause. He would later describe his position as analogous to that of the protagonist of Italo Calvino's *Il barone rampante*, the 18th century aristocrat who decides to spend all his life up a tree without stepping down

but who nonetheless takes part in the French Revolution (Eco and Hall 1987). He casts himself in the role of a latter-day *philosophe* whose task is to criticize and expose corruption, modern forms of superstition, and the abuse of power, resorting when necessary to the weapons of satire and laughter. Eco is almost always on the side of movements before and after 1968 – the very principle of movement, openness and change is at the heart of the cultural project elucidated in *Opera aperta* (1962). He is distrustful, on the other hand, of established parties, especially in an Italian context in which the Communist Party behaves as a kind of second church.

In an essay entitled “Political Language: the Use and Abuse of Rhetoric” published in 1973, Eco sets the agenda for his interventions in politics and public life for the rest of the decade – interventions in which language is a central concern. On the plus side, there is the creative use of language in politics that Eco welcomes. Here figures of rhetoric are used as if for the first time in acts that make us “see reality with new eyes”. “Poets”, he says, “have this important role”. Perhaps not by chance Eco cites the wall writings around the Sorbonne in 1968 as examples of this (Eco 1994). In 1977 he responds with similar enthusiasm to the Dadaist contestation in the streets promoted by students, many from his institute DAMS in the University of Bologna. On negative side, there is the rhetoric designed to confuse and to protect the powerful from accountability. Statements of ministers provide a mountain of examples. But, argues Eco, there is no way of doing without rhetoric. Unless, of course, you abandon persuasion and argument:

when a group claims that discussion is useless and a waste of time, it is better in the name of consistency for it to engage directly in revolutionary action [...] Better still would be resorting to a cowardly

demonstration of armed force that tells no lies and acts as a call to revolution. (Eco 1994: 85)⁴

The fact that Eco was an outside interlocutor of the movements and not someone writing from *within* them situates him very differently to the others. In Gramscian terms, he is a “traditional intellectual” – academic, advisor to Bompiani publishers, collaborator with RAI – whereas Balestrini and Passerini are “organic intellectuals”. The latter, broadly speaking, address themselves first and foremost, in the 1970s at least, to the movements of which they are a part. Eco, however, faces in several directions and acts as a kind of interpreter or translator between different audiences. One audience is constituted by his students and ex-students (in fact, he notes that Guido Viale had regularly attended one of his seminars on comics before becoming a leader of the student movement in Turin). Another audience is constituted by the readers of his pieces in the weekly magazine *L'Espresso* and daily press, later collected in his anthologies *Dalla periferia dell'impero* (1977) and *Sette anni di desiderio* (1983). Eco is never afraid to debate and discuss what is going on around him. Indeed, he takes it as a stimulus and a challenge. His readings of this reality are a kind of practical or applied semiology, an invitation to participate rather than to sit back and let the RAI or *Il corriere della sera* do the work. In the 1960s Eco questioned categories such as ‘mass culture’ suggesting that it was misleading to speak in such generic terms and that this type of labelling was the stock-in-trade of apocalyptic intellectuals. In the 1970s he questioned the use of

⁴ Italian original: “Quando un gruppo ritiene che la discussione si inutile e dilatoria, è meglio che, coerentemente, passi alla azione rivoluzionaria che sostituisce ai lunghi labirinti della persuasione l'azione di una forza popolare che si autogiustifica. O è meglio piuttosto, la turpe evidenza della sopraffazione armata, che non mente a nessuno, e chiama alla ribellione” (105).

categories that allow politicians to treat all forms of extraparliamentary opposition as if they were all ideologically linked to the politics of the Red Brigades. The mission to analyse and to understand - as opposed to condemning and moralizing on the basis of preconceptions - means that Eco was one of the very few commentators who, during the kidnapping of Aldo Moro, seriously read the Red Brigades communiqués. The whole crisis was marked by a breakdown in communication causing Eco to be involved in a struggle on two fronts. The danger for him was the return of a kind of Cold War scenario in which the choice was either/or – either for McCarthy or for Stalin.

Eco writes in “Gli orfani del sessantotto” (1980), the essay that opens the collection *Sette anni di desiderio*:

mi pare che in questi tempi sia cominciato un po' dappertutto un forsennato e dostoevskiano esame di coscienza che porta, da un lato, a identificare il Sessantotto col terrorismo, dall'altro, in molti, a dire più o meno scopertamente: “io in quei giorni non c'ero”. (11)⁵

Among those accused of “associazione sovversiva” and “banda armata” as well as participation in 19 murders, including that of Aldo Moro, was Eco's friend the poet Nanni Balestrini. In fact Balestrini fled Italy and took refuge in Paris, only to be cleared of all charges several years later.

Commentators on *Il nome della rosa* immediately identified it as a political allegory and Eco accepted that it was one of the levels on which it could be read. The urgency of contemporary events might have lessened by the time the book

⁵ “I have the impression that at the moment there's begun almost everywhere a crazed Dostoyevskian examination of the conscience that leads, on the one hand, to identifying '68 with terrorism, and, on the other, to saying more or less openly: ‘I was not involved at the time’”.

was published in 1982, but Eco began to write it in the months following the assassination of Moro when the anti-terrorism emergency was at its height. The actions of the Holy Inquisition in the figure of Bernardo Gui for whom any form of association implied guilt led to a disaster (the destruction of the monastery and the dispersal of the community) that simply compounded the crisis provoked by the mysterious murders in the monastery. I do not want to suggest that Eco's fiction should be read in a political light to the exclusion of other readings – it can also be enjoyed as a detective novel or for its meta-textual devices in which the reader is conscious of her or his role as reader. However, Eco is definitely aiming to be accessible and to *normalize* procedures originating in the neo avant-garde. His readership is a wider public. A public in Italy that would, in Michael Caesar's words referring to Eco's second novel *Pendolo di Foucault* (1988), have had "no difficulty in recognizing the plotting and paranoia of the 1970s, a decade which for many Italians was stretched between the threat and reality of political violence and a pervasive, not to say invasive, suspicion of conspiracy at all levels of public life". (1999: 146)

But why should Eco have chosen to write fiction in the first place and to become, in the process, a writer of fiction?

Concluding Observations

The question leads us back to the theme of the "value of literature", and to some final questions. What did literature have to offer that could not be obtained by other forms of writing? Why in the 1980s do Eco, Balestrini and Passerini write about the events of the previous decade using either the novel or devices taken from fictional modes of narration? How successful are they in what they are trying to achieve? And what is the 'literary value' of their work?

The first thing to say is that oppositional politics and the discourse of politics more generally is heavily compromised, devalued, emptied of meaning by the beginning the 1980s. In

the late 1960s and early 1970s, the trend was towards reading *saggistica* and books about history, politics and society – a trend that was particularly evident in the publishing programme of Feltrinelli publishers. As Adriano Sofri commented nostalgically in an interview in *MicroMega* in 1988:

Far from representing a passing fever, politics was the heart and soul of '68. That is, political passion, the conviction that there was a link that held together and demonstrated the meaning of what was happening in the four corners of the globe; the feeling that one's life belonged to a destiny shared with so many others in every part of the world. (quoted in Lumley 1990: 340)

All that collapses with extraordinary speed. Indeed it is the speed of the collapse as much as the enthusiasms of '68 that helps define a sense of generation. It is a generation cut off from its political origins. It is a generation that is marked by collective failure and defeat. In their different ways our authors are part of this experience and seek to confront it.

Luisa Passerini confronts defeat in *Autoritratto di gruppo* – the group self-portrait of a generation that has experienced a collective defeat. It does not present itself as fiction in that the texts – diary, interviews and testimonies, reconstructions – can claim to describe 'reality'. Yet the dreams are also part of that reality – dreams and the recounting of dreams. The diary has been re-worked posthumously and the dates of entries are treated with the freedom of the novelist. Composite characters are invented to hide identities. And why not? Why not indeed. But Passerini communicates her discomfort towards the end of *Autoritratto*. She is looking forward, she writes with a touch of irony, to getting back to “cose serie, come saggi metodologici con note a piè di pagina e copiose bibliografie [...] sono contenta di tornare al mio *mestiere*” (224). The problem in *Autoritratto* results from the author's

attempt to combine different kinds of writing and evidence that have different claims to veracity. At the same time, there are paragraphs in the penultimate chapter in which the historian is determined to explain, to put some order into the account, and to argue that the centrality of the political and the problem of power need to be reaffirmed if we are not to inhabit a culture full of illusions of well-being. For me *Autoritratto* assumes a task that is almost too demanding – to be a kind of public self-analysis of the 1968 generation in which Luisa Passerini is both in front of and behind the camera. It could be called a problematic text in more ways than one, but for that very reason *Autoritratto* is one of the most interesting as well as unresolved of the works I have discussed. By making herself a subject of her historical narrative Passerini treads where few have dared to follow.

The cases of Eco and Balestrini are rather different in that neither is a historian facing problems of evidence. Moreover their common participation of the *neoavanguardia* in the 1960s included a radical critique of the realist novel, the form of fiction most admired by contemporary Marxists in the tradition of Lukacs. For them, the realist model had patently lost any capacity to represent the contemporary world. By the second half of the 1980s the problematic of the experimental writers had entered the mainstream. The ideas of multiple perspectives, fragmentation, split subjectivities, stories and individual itineraries as opposed to History and collective subjects were discussed in university courses and newspapers, if not at dime stores and bus stations. We are in the territory surveyed by Monica Jansen in her *Il dibattito sul postmoderno in Italia*. Interestingly, as she says, “nel campo letterario [...] le posizioni prese nel dibattito sono in gran parte riconducibili a quelle riguardanti la neoavanguardia del Gruppo 63” (Jansen 2002: 19). While the critique of the idea of an avant-garde is a defining feature of what is called post modernity, the linguistic practices,

from quotation to pastiche and other devices of reflexivity, also have their antecedents in the 1960s in Italy.

In the 1980s Eco and Balestrini are faced with a new problem – the expropriation of the avant-garde. The strategies that they pursue, however, remain consistent with their earlier trajectories. Eco in his *Postille a “Il nome della rosa”* of 1983 spells out his approach very clearly:

Nobody remembers what happened when in 1965 the Gruppo met for a second time in Palermo to discuss the experimental novel ... I remarked [then] “I believe it will be possible to find elements of revolution and contestation in works that apparently lend themselves to facile consumption, and it will also be possible to realise, on the contrary, that certain works, which seem provocative and enrage the public, do not really contest anything”. (Eco 1986: 16)

In his novels he addresses a public that he could never have reached through his journalism, let alone his more academic work. He can be seen to use literature as another means of writing what he writes in his journalism. It is writing that is rich in plot but not so experimental in its use of language. It is a success in terms of sales but of less interest in terms of literary values.

Balestrini, by contrast, continues to frustrate the reader who wants the certainties of clearly defined characters and plot development. He even deprives them of the reassuring presence of full stops and commas. His novels work above all on language, refusing to acknowledge the distinction between prose and poetry. Balestrini also continues to refer without embarrassment or excuses to the political movements of the 1970s. There is an uncompromising readiness to stare defeat in the face. For Balestrini the worst form of hypocrisy and bad faith is shown by those who delude themselves into thinking Giangiacomo Feltrinelli and others who chose the ‘armed

struggle' were the victim of manipulation by the CIA or neo-fascists. The greatest danger is that those once active in the movements will not recount their stories themselves. Instead this history will be written by others – in courtrooms, in newspapers, and on television. In the meantime, Balestrini assumes the role of the chronicler-poet.

The writers I have chosen are remarkable for their *impegno*, their continued engagement as public intellectuals. The texts I have focused on testify to the importance of the “relationship of reciprocity and responsibility” between writer and reader that Jennifer Burns calls the “acid test” of commitment (5). This is underlined, especially in the case of Passerini and Balestrini, by the political nature of the subject matter and by the effort that is required of the reader in deciphering the text. So far I have emphasised the *impegno* on the part of the writer, but what about the reader?

The reader was asked to face political subject matter in a context – the 1980s – in which it had become a source of difficulty, embarrassment, shame and even guilt. The effort required is underlined or, better, formalized in the language of the texts – the different registers and genres in Passerini, the disruption of processes of identification in Balestrini. In Eco we can even choose to follow the difficult rather than easy path of interpretation. How we assess the value of literature is an open question, but the value also derives from the effort that we bring to it.

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